

Environmental spy



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AMAZING stories

ALL NEW FICTION

including Gregory Benford's novella,
"Titan Falling" • Wayne Wightman's
novel, "Metamind" • plus Book
Reviews & Film Focus/"The Empire
Strikes Back" • Interview/Ron Goulart



Cover art by Chris Foss • Interior
Illustrations by Gary Freeman
& Don Holcombe

IN THIS ISSUE

1980 HAS BEEN a very good year. On January 4, Gregory Benford submitted "Titan Falling" (page 20), along with a pleasant letter mentioning his decade-long association with *Amazing* (science column, many short stories) and his desire to renew the connection. Needless-to-say we are more than elated to be working with such a gifted writer and to have him back in our ranks. The novella, "Titan Falling", is one solid gold Cadillac of a story with a main character to match. Benford's background in astrophysics lends characters and setting a vibrant authenticity — a perfect blend of science and story craftsmanship. Although never before published in its present form, the story has an interesting history. Be sure to read about it in the author's foreword.

A couple of weeks later in January, a writer named Wayne Wightman ("The White Ones", Nov., 1979 *Amazing*; "Do Unto Others", Feb., 1980 *Amazing*; and "The Imprecise Delights of Love", July, 1980 *Fantastic*) came to town with an extraordinary collection of stories he has penned over the last year. This perfectly sane-looking person has created a bizarre, tragicomic universe where running rampant are (in various combinations) raging violence, wicked satire, the tenderest love, immense suffering, incredible courage and nobility, utter despair and somehow, a piercing ray of hope. The stories share a common fabric of vivid images and ideas that bend your head while making you laugh out loud or shed a tear. We hope you'll be able to read them all on the pages of *Amazing*. Our current Wightman offering is his novel, "Metamind", a sparkling science fantasy incorporating most of the above-mentioned WW ingredients.

Rounding out our feast of stories are two entertaining short pieces — "Visions of Diana" by Daniel Gilbert and "Speedplay" by Joel Richards. And the topping on the cake — some very fine work from a very special group of columnists who deserve more praise than we can adequately deliver. Many fans have written expressing appreciation for these features — including Super-Fan FJ ("Amazing *Fornies*") Ackerman.

Credit for the beauty of our package goes to illustrators Chris Foss (on our cover with a reproduction from "21st Century Foss" — see book reviews), Don Holcombe and Gary Freeman. Staff artist Freeman is destined to be among the top sf and fantasy illustrators. We are very proud to be working with him.

A great year. And there's much more to come.

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by Tom Staicar

21ST CENTURY FOSS by Chris Foss. (Dragon's Dream, Ltd., Holland. Distributed in the U.S. by: Big O, Box 6186, Charlottesville, Virginia 22906. \$10.95). Regardless of the competition for your SF art book dollars, this large paperback edition of the best of Chris Foss should be at or near the very top of your list of "must haves." Born in England in 1946, Foss was prevented from studying to be an artist by his disapproving parents, who guided him into Cambridge University where he studied architecture. Breaking out of that career, he struggled as a poor artist, earning his living by driving cabs and selling a few cartoons and drawings on the side. Bob Guccione, publisher of *Penthouse* (and currently also publisher of *Omni*) helped him by buying some early paintings and drawings, giving Foss the encouragement he needed at that point.

Once book publishers began featuring Chris Foss covers on their books, the Foss SF cover boom began. Mainly featured on English paperbacks, Foss' paintings have now adorned the covers of more than 100 different books. He was featured in the short-lived but high quality British magazine *Science Fiction Monthly*, leading to more fame and popularity. Film directors have sought his talents in designing and sketching the early planning work for such films as *Superman*, *Alien* and the delayed production of a film based on Frank Herbert's *Dune* epic.

21st Century Foss is an awe-inspiring collection. Nearly all of its 143 pages are filled with the vivid, bursts-of-color backgrounds and the looming, oddly-shaped space vehicles that are Chris Foss' trademarks.

Technological hardware is the emphasis here, with human or alien figures either non-existent or else dimly seen as tiny shapes among the rows of windows. This approach is possibly more effective in evoking a sense of the alien than a more direct representation of the beings themselves. We wonder who is piloting the stubby little red and white craft which is approaching the giant spaceliner above the planet.

Some of the ships remind one of lizards, wasps or dragons. These are not pointed cylindrical rockets; they are asymmetrical and non-aerodynamic in design, more in keeping with the needs of a far future mode of space transportation. Whether streaking toward a space platform, blasting out of a docking area or engaging other craft in dogfights in space, the Foss vehicles are minutely detailed and super-realistic.

Chris Foss has inspired a legion of imitators, but he is still the original and the best at showing the intricately designed marvels of future technology.



Lord Valentine's Castle by Robert Silverberg (Harper & Row, \$12.50). Locus reported that Harper & Row agreed to pay \$127,500 for this book, before it was written. This led to speculation that the author must need money and that his book probably wouldn't be worth that much. The pressure on Robert Silverberg must have been intense. After a long period away from writing, he would now face people who would say things like "This first page isn't worth all that money, and I'm not so sure this second page is worth it . . ." and so on.

I read the publisher's synopsis before starting to read my advance galley edition of the book and was unimpressed. In addition, I had a head cold and was in a bad mood as I balanced the heavy book on my lap with a tissue box next to it.

Nonetheless, I loved the book and now consider it one of my all-time favorites. As I turned each page I became more and more engrossed in this tale of the deposed Lord Valentine, thrust aside from his rightful place on the throne and forced to live the life of a member of a troupe of traveling jugglers on the planet Majipoor. After about 100 pages, I began to feel unhappy about the prospect of eventually reaching the last page. Unlike other large novels, there was no padding in this one.

The novel combines all the good writing traits of the "old and new Silverberg," finally achieving a synthesis of the moody, introspective anti-hero and the action-adventure alien planet types of novel. Here, Lord Valentine explores his own weaknesses and questions his own motivations for seeking power but this time it is done in the context of an inexorably moving plot which holds the reader's attention. More than a simple adventure novel with its colorful aliens and exotic Majipoor background, there are mystical and Zen-like elements here as well. The author manages to match and then transcend the epic quest fantasy of the Tolkien variety as well as the Jack Vance and Frank Herbert types of SF novels. *Lord Valentine's Castle* succeeds as entertainment, as a book which could be thoroughly accessible to the casual reader who liked *Star Wars* or

Children of Dune. On another level, it should satisfy the most demanding aficionado who demands a multi-layered book on a grand scale.

Majipoor is a huge planet inhabited by humans, four-armed Skandars, various aliens, telepathic wizards and the original natives, since pushed onto small reservations, the shape-changing Metamorphs. Like Bradbury's Martians, the Metamorphs can terrorize others by creating exact duplicates of anyone. In one battle, Valentine's friends must fight eerie replicas of themselves.

Dreams are projected into the minds of the dwellers on Majipoor, and Lord Valentine's amnesia is cut through by weird and terrifying nightmares which allow him to piece together the true identity which has been taken from him. His own body is being used by an imposter who put Valentine's mind into another's body. Political intrigues abound as Valentine tries to unravel the story of the power struggle which brought about his own exile. The main problem he faces is to somehow regain control before the evil Dominin Barjazid, who rules in his place, turns the planet into a repressive dictatorship under his reign.

A love story develops as the simple juggler Valentine is aided by Carabella, a member of the jugglers' troupe. She fears that their love will end if Valentine returns to power, as her simple ways will then be pushed aside by the majesty of his new lifestyle and power. She also fears that Valentine will die at the hands of assassins sent to stop him before he reaches the end of his quest.

Gardening, a real-life fascination of Robert Silverberg, takes on added significance on a symbolic level, as does juggling. Both pursuits become a means of reaching new levels of awareness beyond their physical actions. The interest in Zen and mysticism is a thread which has been found all along in Silverberg's writings and is used here most effectively.

There are few writers capable of creating a synthesis like the one in this novel. If there is any justice, *Lord Valentine's Castle* will become an honored and revered classic with sales surpassing those of

Frank Herbert and all the rest. This novel is an unqualified triumph.

Far Future Calling. Uncollected Science Fiction and Fantasies of Olaf Stapledon. Edited and With an Authorized Biography by Sam Moskowitz. Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian. (Oswald Train: Publisher, P.O. Box 1891, Philadelphia, PA 19105. \$12.00). Stapledon (1886-1950) was a British philosopher who wrote classics such as *Sirius*, *Last and First Men*, *Odd John* and *Star Maker*. Sam Moskowitz has assembled this historic volume of previously uncollected material, to which he has added a 69-page biography and a report on Stapledon's visit to the U.S.

I asked Sam Moskowitz to let us have some insights into how this book came about. He wrote that he had asked Mrs. Stapledon if he might interview her and on a trip to England he was able to do this: "I motored to northern England near Liverpool where Mrs. Stapledon lived, took her to dinner, was invited to stay overnight and that evening and the next morning not only interviewed her, but was permitted to examine his study with his papers still remaining. I saw then the uncollected science fiction which I was later to include in *Far Future Calling*." He told me that his friend Oswald Train, who has been publishing specialty SF books since the 1940's, agreed to publish an edition which also includes "Interplanetary Man," a 1948 British Interplanetary Society discussion with Stapledon and Arthur C. Clarke speculating about the future of space travel and other topics.

Stories presented include "The Man Who Became A Tree" (in which the lead character experiences all the emotions and even the sexuality of a tree), "A World of Sound," "East is West" and "A Modern Magician." The Moskowitz pieces provide insights into the personal and public lifestyle of the philosopher who influenced SF so much. When Moskowitz was a young SF fan (he organized the first World Science Fiction Convention, among other things), having any SF book published in hardcover was a wonder and convincing a large publisher to put out an edition of

Stapledon "philosophical fantasy" was nearly impossible. Things have changed but the loving care which goes into the editions like this one are no different than in the old days. This well-bound volume, complete with fine illustrations by Stephen E. Fabian is a must for people who want to gain a glimpse into the life of one of SF's giants.

Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature: A Checklist, 1700-1974, With "Contemporary Science Fiction Authors II." Compiled and edited by R. Reginald. 2 Volumes. 1,141 pages. (Gale Research Co., Book Tower, Detroit, MI 48826. \$64.00 set). This is the definitive reference set that SF scholars and collectors have dreamed about for years. A huge bibliography of books with 15,884 entries accurately covering SF, fantasy and supernatural literature. The second volume contains biographies, personal and career highlights and non-SF interests of 1,443 writers. Some of them have written autobiographical essays which follow their biographical data. As if all this were not enough, there are also indexes to series, awards, and the Belmont and Ace Double novel series.

"R. Reginald" is a long-time SF expert and publisher of Borgo Press, whose real name is Michael Roy Burgess. After using the pseudonym for a while, Burgess discovered that someone else had been using his real name as a pseudonym for paperback porno novels. Rather than create confusion, Burgess continues to use the Reginald name, even establishing a joint bank account along with his pseudonym in order to simplify his double life in financial dealings.

Except for serious collectors, few will be able to afford the \$64.00 price, although the set is worth that amount. For most readers, the best approach is to fill out a written suggestion form at a college or public library. These suggestions for purchase are carefully considered by librarians who decide whether a certain book is worth buying. There is no doubt that this set is a landmark work which all libraries should have. ●

Fans, Prose & Cons

by Steve Fahnstalk

PART THE NEXT: A CONVENTION CONCATENATION

I love fan mail. I get a little chill up my spine when people write to me and tell me they like my column and that they think I'm doing something *worthwhile*. (As my hero, Tom Lehrer says, "More, more, I'm still not satisfied!") And I like replying to fan letters, too. SO WHY ARE THERE A LOT OF PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO HAVEN'T YET WRITTEN? Besides the obvious ego reasons (in fandom, we call personal praise "ego-boo" [from "ego-boosting"]), I learn a lot from your letters. Frinstance, I learn what areas I haven't said enough about in this column:

From a couple of my recent letters, I've learned that I haven't yet said enough about what you do at cons. So I'm going to devote the major portion of my column to that subject. I'm even going to answer a couple of questions that I've been asked, like: "Does one *have* to attend these events in costume?", and, "Do you mean to tell me that if I go to one of these things and plunk down seven bucks I'll get to meet Poul Anderson?" (Question #1: Not unless you want to. Question #2: Sure. Look for him in the bar, especially if they have aquavit!)

Okay. Let's take a sample con listing and really look at it. Ready? "NORWES-CON III, Mar. 28-30, \$7 to NorwesCon III, Box 24207, Seattle, WA 98124. GOH: Alfred Bester, Fred Pohl. TM: Theodore Sturgeon. Usual events, plus 55 authors!" Okay, what does this all mean? Well, it means that you send, first of all, a check for that \$7 to the box number. You get back a receipt and at least one PR, or progress report, and a hotel reservation card, and a banquet ticket form.

Now you've got to decide a couple of things. Do you want to stay in the con

hotel, and do you want to attend the banquet? My recommendation is "yes" on both of these, especially if you're a newcomer to conventions. (If you can't afford the admittedly high prices hotels charge, then by all means take a friend and split the room rent. There are ways to do almost anything cheaply). If you don't stay in the hotel, you've gotta commute to wherever you're staying, and you might miss out on some of the parties. (More on parties later.) The banquet is for fun and speechifying; never mind the rubber chicken. The more cons I go to, the more I enjoy the banquet speeches and presentations.

Let's look at the PR. First, there's a lot of uninteresting stuff about the guests and the con committee (the "concom"), and how to get to the hotel, and like that. We'll skip that for now, and go right to the meat of the matter: the programming and the films. In the programming, you'll find such items as: "Sex in SF", "The Neofan Panel", "Getting Published", "The Writing of Author 'X'", and so weiter. You'll also see things like fanzine workshops, story readings, a masquerade, and a huckster's (dealer's) room. And films, like "Forbidden Planet", "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" (a personal favorite), "2001", and many more. And special-interest programming, like wargaming, D & D, SCA (I'll devote a later column to the Society for Creative Anachronism), Georgett Heyer, ERB (The "Dum-Dum" is held at the WorldCon). And more. And more.

Be realistic. One person can't possibly attend every panel, workshop, film or event. So look at the descriptions in the PR — what do you particularly want to see? If (again, using NorwesCon as an example), you're really interested in fantasy, and there's a panel on fantasy with Steve King, Stephen R. Donaldson, H. Warner Munn, and Charlie Grant, then mark that one as a must-see. Likewise, if hardcore (nuts 'n bolts) sf is your thing, mark the one with Jerry Pournelle. Plan out a tentative schedule, but DON'T TRY TO GO FOR TEN HOURS STRAIGHT! Leave time for food breaks. Leave time for conversation breaks. Leave time for potty breaks, facrineoutloud!

Well, now you have an inkling of what

goes on at a con. When I say "the usual events" in a listing, I mean panels, speeches, art show & auction (your chance to hang an original sf work on your wall!), hustlers ('scusi) hucksters, banquet *et al.* It'll all be new to you, and most of it will be fascinating, if not downright addictive.

"But I'm shy, and I don't know anyone there!" you cry. "How do I do it?" Seasy. When you walk up to the registration desk, you're going to be in line with hundreds of fans, and some of them will be carrying books or items of an SF nature, and there's an opening for a conversation right there. "Is that Jerry Pournelle's latest? What did you think of it?" "Hi, I'm Steve. Can I look at that sword?" And you go on from there. *

Meeting authors is just as easy. You can either wait until the "Meet the Pros" party is in full swing, or you can watch and catch them while they're either not busy with someone else or just drinking in the bar. They do drink a lot, in general (with some notable exceptions), especially if someone else (you) is buying. All that's necessary in meeting authors, artists, or fellow fans is a small amount of courtesy. If you don't barge in on a private conversation; if you don't demand a disproportionate amount of time; if you don't act as if you're granting someone an ineffable boon by gracing them with your presence, they'll be glad to meet you. Usually. Oh, we have our boors, too — you'll know them when you see them — they're the people who seem to seriously think that they're the be-all and end-all; they're the ones who seem to be able to hold out for hours on end on any subject; and they're the ones who sneer at you if you aren't "in with the in-crowd".

Don't even bother with them. Go your own way, make your own circle of friends. Those clods are usually few and far between. The majority of fans are as nice a group as you could ever want to meet. Meet them.

Okay. Enough preachy-preachy. Let's look at a couple of the other things that will be going on that you can do by yourself (if, let's say, you're still too shy to meet someone). You can go to the huckster's room

In that area they will have, for sale, just about anything you can think of that's science-fictional. Books, magazines, posters, buttons, holograms, uniforms, weapons, and records are just some of the items you'll see. (The hucksterzroom, incidentally, is a great place to buy fanzines and some of the small-press stuff I review). You will be tempted to blow your whole budget for the next two years if this is the first con you've attended. Resist that temptation — you'll need some money for the artshow/auction.

The artshow is the place where you'll see some of the finest original fan and pro sf/fantasy art in the known world. And most of it is for sale. Sale/auction methods vary from con to con, but there is always an information sheet available. If you have any of the collector in your soul, you WILL leave that con with at least one small piece of artwork.

I'm saving my favorite for last. The parties. Ah, yes, the parties. There's the greatest way yet invented to meet other people. Whether you drink liquor or not, there's a place for you. All you do is walk down the hall and read the signs. "Blah-blah in Room 106", "Denver in '81, room 65". Or look for an open door with the sounds of merriment wafting from it. Unless you are told otherwise, an open-door party is an open party. Be nice, and ask, though — but usually, if you ask, you'll be told to come on in — and whoever you ask often starts a conversation with you — and you've made a new acquaintance!

Another nice thing about a con is that even if it's your first, you have a chance to get acquainted with the people who run it, simply by foregoing some of the programming. All you have to do is go up to the registration desk and volunteer to work. That's right, work! Unpaid. If you're new, you'll usually end up being a "gopher", unless you have definite skills that are needed by the concom, but you get to meet a lot of nice people that way, and you not only feel (and are!) helpful, but you're really "in." And what better way to learn the ins and outs of putting on a con?

So. I hope all this has helped. If I get enough questions between now and then, I may go into even more detail in the next

column. Unless you send an SASE, I won't be able to reply personally to your letters, but I will use at least a portion of my column answering some of the questions asked. Remember, this is your column too, so keep me on your mailing list. There's a very large world of fandom out there, and it's easy to participate — and AMAZING wants to keep you au courant. Till next issue, CLEAR ETHER!

CONVENTION LISTINGS:

STARBASE BALTIMORE; May 23-26; \$20 to PO Box 426, Randallstown, MD 21133. Checks payable to "Starbase Balto". GOH: Walter Koenig, Geo. Takei. Bloopers, etc. Guess what kind of con?

WHATCON II; May 23-25; \$10 to PO Box 2802, Sta. A, Champaign, IL 61820. GOH: Larry Niven, Fan GOH: Doug Rice. Small attendance con. Ramada Inn. No room rates announced.

AMBERCON II; June 6-8; \$10 (\$5 for 1 day) to Box 12589 Wichita, KS 67209. GOH: Fred Pohl, Bob Tucker, Vincent Di Fate, Walt Liebscher. Wichita Royale. S: \$28, D: \$36.

MIDSOUTHCON; June 20-22; \$8 to 6/1, \$10 after, to: Rt. 1, Box 322-A, Leoma, TN 38468 (enclose SASE). GOHL: Fred Pohl, Bob Tucker. TM: Kelly Freas. Usual events, plus a 24-hour party room! Sheraton Inn Huntsville. S: \$27, D: \$32.

WESTERCON 33: \$20 after 5/30 to Box 2009, Van Nuys, CA 91404. GOH: Zelazny, Vardeman, TM: Frank Denton. The West Coast's 3-ring circus. Not as many authors as your typical NorwesCon, though (They MADE me say that!). Hyatt Hotel. S: \$29, D: \$34. This biggie is always on the Fourth of July weekend.

EMPIRICON II; July 4-6; \$7.50 to 6/21, \$9 after, to: Box 682, Church St. Station, New York, NY 10008. GOH: Clement, Delaney, Freff, Malzberg. Prince George Hotel.

MYSTICON; July 4-6; \$5 to 12/31 to Box 12294, Roanoke VA 24024. GOH: Gordon Dickson. TM: Nelson Bond. Sheraton Red Lion, no rates given. Usual events.

ARCHON IV; July 11-13; \$10 to "St. Louis SF Society", Box 15852, Overland, MO 63114. GOH: Robert Bloch, Bob Tucker. TM: Ed Bryant. Another 24-hour party room, plus usual stuff. Chase Park Plaza. S: \$39, D: \$44.

OKON '80; \$7.50 to 7/1, \$9 after to Box 4229, Tulsa, OK 74104. GOH: Alan Dean Foster, Shelby Bush, Mary Kay Jackson. TM: Gordy Dickson. Also: Williamson, Asprin, Cherryh, Lafferty, Killough. Usual stuff plus champagne brunch. Mayo Hotel. S: \$33, D: \$41.

AUTOCLAVE 4; July 25-27; \$6 advance, \$10 at door. 2412 Galpin, Royal Oak, MI 48068. GOH: Jeanne Gomoll, Dan Steffan (what? no pro??) TM: Ted "I used to work at AMAZING" White. Outdoor banquet-party, etc. Radisson-Cadillac, no rates given.

PARACON III; Aug. 1-3; \$6 to 6/30, \$8 after. c/o Casto, 425 Waupelani Dr. #24, State College, PA 16801. GOH: C.L. Grant, Kelly Freas. FGOH: Richard Frank. Usual events. Sheraton Penn State Inn.

RIVERCON V; Aug. 1-3; \$7.50 to 7/15, \$10 after to Box 8251, Louisville, KY 40208. GOH: Zelazny, Lou Tabakow. TM: Vincent Di Fate. Midnite masquerade, river cruise (\$2). Galt House. \$37.

NOREASCON II; Aug. 29-Sept. 1; \$30 to 6/30 to Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge, MA 02139. GOH: Knight & Wilhelm. Bruce Pelz. TM: Robert Silverberg. THIS IS THE BIG ONE! This is the WorldCon — and if you can afford one con this year, this should be the one!

MOSCON II; Sept. 12-14; \$8 to 9/1, \$10 after to PO Box 9141, Moscow ID 83843. GOH: Jerry Sohl, George Barr. TM: Me! FGOH: Frank Denton. This is Moscow's biggie (and only). Jacuzzi party, plus usual. Also Schomburg, Trestrail. Travelodge. S: \$23, D: \$28. Come an' visit!

Send Fanzines and news to Steve c/o this column, NW 440 Windus St., Pullman, WA 99163.

Space did not permit full con and zine listings this issue.

P*S*F*Q (Pretentious Science Fiction Quarterly); quarterly; #3 & 4 combined is \$3, or 4/\$6; to PO Box 1496, Cupertino, CA 95015. Michael Ward, editor. This is a serious zine (sercon, remember?), and not as pretentious as the title suggests. Articles range from examinations of the Gor books to interviews, and all the usual sercon stuff. Not particularly heavy reading, or hard to understand. Nicely laid out, with illustrations from such as Gaughan, Canfield, Nordling, Dowling, etc. Offset printed, and well worth the money.

ALIEN WORLDS: \$12.95 (Aus.) from VOID Publications, PO Box 66, St. Kilda, Victoria 3182, Australia. When Paul Collins sent me a review copy of this book, he said he hadn't been getting any notices in the fan or pro presses, and I think that's a bloody shame! This anthology contains stories by Bert Chandler, Cherry Wilder, and others, and has some darned good fiction that, to the best of my knowledge, isn't available anywhere else! If you can dig up the money, you should buy this book. ●



Edited by Paul Collins

Including original science fiction
by Australia's top writers....

FILM FOCUS

by Steven Dimeo

May has already seen the opening of two long-awaited fantasy films and August will usher in a revamped re-release — all of which may point to a disappointing summer of 1980 for SF film.

Probably the most curious of the offerings is Stanley Kubrick's version of Stephen King's novel of psychological horror *The Shining*. An ambitious and literate book that suffers finally from the commonplaces of most haunted house fiction, it seems a peculiar choice for the director of "Dr. Strangelove," "2001" and "A Clockwork Orange" even if he broke away from science fiction in 1976 with the languid but picturesque historical drama "Barry Lyndon." In this apparent attempt to rival the reigning prince of horror films, "The Exorcist," Jack Nicholson plays the troubled writer Jack Torrance who, after losing his teaching job because of alcoholism, accepts a position as caretaker of the Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Rockies during the off season to finish a play. King himself is not especially happy with that choice or with Kubrick's selection of Shelley Duvall as the wife Wendy. As he has concluded in a *Cinefantastique* interview (8:1), "But even if his film of 'The Shining' is an artistic failure, it will probably be a commercial success . . . And even if it's a failure, it will be an interesting failure."

Preproduction notes long before chronicled major changes Kubrick made in translating King's story to the screen, some for the sake of credibility that could well improve on the original. In the book a topiary comes alive, the hedge beasts threatening and ultimately attacking Torrance. Unable to make that appear real even with the technical legerdemain he has demonstrated in earlier films, Kubrick has relied instead on a hedge labyrinth. Dispensing with King's rather silly mystery in-

volving the word "Redrum" (read it backwards for the "answer"), Kubrick has added a bit of SF from his own imagination in a scene where computer games terrorize the boy Danny Torrance who has been cursed with "second sight" — what hotel cook Halloran (Scatman Crothers) calls "the shining." If he avoids such things as the melodramatic contrivances of the fiery climax but is faithful to the best in the novel such as that chillingly effective scene when Danny confronts the horror in Room 217 of the hotel, Kubrick may truly transcend the source as Brian DePalma almost did with "Carrie." Then again what are we to make of the fact that at press time Warner Brothers did not have any publicity stills available because Kubrick was "sitting on them" while he continued to edit the film, and the studio refused to divulge any further information on this picture originally scheduled for a January, 1980 release?



Lucasfilm has been even more tight-lipped about the "Star Wars" sequel "The Empire Strikes Back" scheduled for release May 21st just three years after its original started making history as the largest grossing film of the century. Long ago having passed the \$25 million mark in production costs (almost three times what "Star Wars" cost to make), "The Empire" brings back the trio of heroes that made Darth Vader sink off conveniently after Luke Skywalker's destruction of the Death Star. All spokesman Craig Miller would tell us at press time was that this adventure takes place in part on the ice planet Hoth (filmed in Norway where an avalanche temporarily halting shooting in 1979), in the cloud city of Bespin, and somewhere else that would be a "surprise." Although George Lucas again

wrote the story, screenplay credits go to the late SF action-adventure stylist Leigh Brackett and to Lawrence Kasdan, a new writer also responsible for the script to "Radars of the Lost Ark," a joint George Lucas-Steven Spielberg venture going into production late this year. Lucas himself has chosen to give over the directorial reins this time to Irvin Kershner ("A Fine Madness," "The Flim Flam Man," "Up the Sandbox") who is himself a science fiction aficionado.

Word has leaked out that "The Empire" deals much more with characterization than "Star Wars" did. There is much more emphasis on background and motivation allowing the romantic triangle — Luke, Leia and Han — to be fully developed. We hear that contrary to the rumor that Han dies in this film, he does not — but actor Harrison Ford has not signed on for another sequel. Also, word has it that we will see Darth Vader without his mask.

Special effects for the film are being directed by Brian ("2001," "Space 1999") Johnson at a new Lucas film effects facility near San Francisco. Some work is said to have already begun here for the third "Star Wars" movie. One big reason for the current swelled budget is the full-size pirate ship (Han Solo's "Millennium Falcon") built by a British Navy Yard. It weighs in at over 40 tons, stands 16 feet high, is about 80 feet long and is said to be capable of flying.

In addition to all the regulars — Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford, David Prowse, etc. — "The Empire" stars Billy Dee Williams as Lando Calrissian, the man who sells Han Solo the "Falcon" and who runs the Cloud City of Bespin.

We can't help but acknowledge the "Star Wars" phenomenon although its producers and majority of fans aren't really paying any attention to the real world of science fiction. Too bad, but that's the way it is.

Finally, Spielberg plans to re-release this August a longer, re-edited "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," that \$18 million disappointment which in its original form has come in as the ninth all-time money-maker, having already grossed more than \$77 million. Presumably Spielberg will reinstate his concluding song "When You Wish Upon a Star" included in

an earlier preview version prior to its official Christmas, 1977, opening. The two most cinematically successful scenes then were Richard Dreyfuss' first encounter with a UFO in his pickup truck at the crossroads, and Melinda Dillon's attempt under sinister Douglas Trumbull skies to save Cary Guffey from abduction. Both sequences displayed the same skill for mood and suspense Spielberg proved in "Jaws" and throughout much of "Duel." The rest, however, drags for lack of conflict. That brief brush with the Air Force trying to cover up the landing of the mother ship at Devil's Tower just isn't enough. Adding another twenty minutes inside the ship at the end, as he has already done, will only protract the pointlessness. Spielberg would have been better advised to move up to other things, but it's never easy to discourage an artist from fruitless efforts, especially when in America he can make so much more money at them anyway.

But then summers have always been notoriously lucrative reruns, no matter what they held for unsuspecting viewers. Maybe that's the reason we've come to call this the "silly season." ●

AMAZING INTERVIEW

An Interview With Ron Goulart

by Darrell Schweitzer

RON GOULART began his writing career in advertising, providing copy for 55 different Chex cereal boxes and TV ads for tuna and peanut butter. Since his first SF story sale in 1952, Goulart has built a reputation as a leading writer of satirical and humorous SF. His tales set on the Barnum System (named after P.T. Barnum) and involving the wacky shape-changing Chameleon Corps, have won the writer a loyal following. His zany robots and unpredictable humans can be found in over sixty short stories and more than thirty books including *SHAGGY PLANET*, *FLUX*, *WHAT'S BECOME OF SCREWLOOSE?* and his 1970 novel *AFTER THINGS FELL APART*, which won

him the Edgar for best mystery novel. His non-fiction includes *CHEAP THRILLS: AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF THE PULPS*, *THE HARDBOILED DICKS* (about detectives in fiction) and a book about the effects of TV advertising on children. Goulart has written comic strips and has worked in the graphic story field, including Byron Preiss' *WEIRD HEROES* series.

Amazing: Why have so few science fiction writers specialized in humor?

Goulart: There are two answers to that. One is, a lot of them have. Listen, when I was growing up reading science fiction, I was always fascinated by people like Fredric Brown and Henry Kuttner. At the time even Bradbury did a story every once in a while that was sort of funny. There were a lot of people who did — Sprague de Camp, Anthony Boucher, and others. I've been called a satirist, but I'm not sure that's accurate. I think of myself more as a comedy writer. I think these guys were writing comedy stuff, too, light stuff. In a more general sense now, there are just not that many people who write comedy in any area. It was always a minority group, and that's why guys who can really do it in certain areas are highly prized. Not in the science fiction field, necessarily, but in some areas. I can't think of too many people now besides myself who do comedy, except maybe Bob Sheckley still does some, and I guess de Camp once in a while. There may be a few others who I don't read.

Amazing: Do you find any inherent difficulties in doing science fiction as comedy?

Goulart: No. The only thing I find is that sometimes the editors or readers will be a little bit protective of this category and say we don't want to make fun of it. I've had a couple of sword and sorcery type things rejected because the editors felt that this is one area which is pretty much sacred in terms of kidding around. It's got to be done straight or not at all. The reason I do comedy in science fiction so much is that it's easier for me to sell science fiction. It's very difficult to sell a mainstream, non-category humorous novel. Once they get wind of what it is, some publishers won't even look at it. There aren't too many guys in the world who do what I do. There aren't too many people in the mainstream turning out six humor novels a year, or in any other category. Donald Westlake was

doing a lot of mysteries, but there aren't many people who do that kind of thing. It's not a field where they're crying for more and more comedy novels. Everybody asks why there isn't more funny stuff around, but somehow those people are never editors or publishers.

Amazing: My guess would be you're dealing with the conventional wisdom of the Powers That Be. The sword and sorcery editor would figure his books are read mostly by adolescents who aren't going to get the joke anyway, therefore it must be done straight.

Goulart: It's hard to say, because adolescents on the other hand are one of the great comedy audiences. They're the people who made *Monty Python* the ten day wonder of television. They support Steve Martin and the *Saturday Night Live* type of thing, if you want to consider any of that humor. No, I'm not quite clear on this point. It seems to me that my kind of stuff is irreverent, and certainly that's something which would appeal to adolescents. But I think there is something in the mythology of sword and sorcery books that makes the inclusion of humor seem like making fun of a church ritual or laughing in church — which I used to do too when I was a church-goer. This was one of the reasons they threw me out.

Amazing: Some people may be able to appreciate humor more readily off the screen than on the printed page. It takes a certain kind of imagination on the part of the reader.

Goulart: Yeah, and now, particularly with television, you're cued to laugh. You have a laugh-track, or you have people in funny clothes. You're all set up. You turn on *Lovey* and *Shirley* and it's going to be funny. You don't expect to turn on Quincy and have it break you up. In other words, each show is already packaged to be serious or tragic or comic, and as somebody said somewhere about me, I tend to do stuff that's kind of deadpan at times. I'm not nudging you about the joke — some people think I am; it depends on what critic you're reading — so I can see how you could read some of my stuff and read it completely seriously. I don't know what that would get you, but it's possible.

Amazing: It would get you confused.

Goulart: People ask me how come I'm never serious, which is not their failing but mine if they've read all that I've written. I've

done a hell of a lot of straight stuff. Particularly in the mystery field I have done a lot of short stories which are completely gloomy and sad. Lenore Glenoffler called them "loathsome, gruesome" — that was a compliment. I think she meant that as a compliment.

Amazing: Were you originally attracted to humorous science fiction in which the humor is self-contained, or that in which it is about the form? For example, one of your most memorable early pieces, "Ralph Wollstonecraft Hedge: A Memoir," is out and out parody.

Goulart: I was originally attracted to two things, to parody and to science fiction, along with a lot of other categories. When I first started writing science fiction, in those long ago days, it was easier to sell parodies because I was dealing mostly with Anthony Boucher; we both lived in Berkeley and I knew him and he thought I was an amusing fellow. I would do these parodies and he would buy them. But I had already written for the college humor magazine at the University of California, *THE PELICAN*, and I had started there doing parodies of more obvious stuff, television, movies, and so forth. But I wanted to write fiction of some kind, and parody after a while becomes a limitation. That's what's happened to Mel Brooks. In his movies he has to keep finding something to parody, and he can't seem to find comedy in the innate situation anymore. Unless you've seen Hitchcock you can't laugh at *High Anxiety*, that sort of thing. Any good parody, as Boucher used to say, should be self-contained. In other words, even if you've never read Lovecraft, there should be something in that "Ralph Wollstonecraft Hedge" that you'd laugh at, which would set up its own target and knock it down, rather than say you have to put this story together with another story. That's what *ELLERY QUEEN'S* still does. When I used to sell parodies to *ELLERY QUEEN'S*, they would put the story I was parodying in there, to say to the reader, "Hey, do you get it?" Also there's simple economics. I was getting like \$25 or \$50 in those days for those parodies, which were like three pages long. I said, wait a minute, if I wrote a short story and got three or four cents a word, I'd get twice as much money. Gradually I began to experiment and see if I could do different kinds of humor and still satisfy myself. So I began to do more and

more short stories. Gradually then that lead into the novel. It's much harder to sustain comedy, obviously, in a whole novel. Amazing: But still your comedies are derived from the contemporary cultural scene, such as *Cowboy Heaven* which is about Hollywood, or "Garbage", which is about six Tom Mix clones. Couldn't this be a similar limitation if things shift and nobody knows who Tom Mix was?

Goulart: Yeah, I was reading in Sam Lundwall's history of science fiction that Goulart has written dozens and dozens of novels about robots that don't function and it's beginning to be boring. You can't fault the guy, even if he's wrong, because I haven't written dozens and dozens of novels about anything. I have written ninety novels, only half of which are science fiction, and there's a robot in every one of them, I must admit, but again, with comedy, if it's funny, it's funny. If you pick up *David Copperfield*, or *Tom Jones*, or a Jeeves novel, it's still funny, even if you don't know the culture that Dickens or Fielding or Wodehouse were working out of. There should be something innate. I mean, a fool is a fool in any century, and an asshole's an asshole, and if a guy's horny, he's horny, or whatever. And if somebody is pompous and inflated, the language and the rhetoric can change, but it's always satisfying to see an ass toppled. I feel that in *Cowboy Heaven*, with the traditional focal character — I won't call him a hero — the agent who has to take the android to the cowboy heaven, is a naive guy, even if he is a Hollywood agent, and I know it sounds pompous, but he's naive in the tradition of Candide or such figures. He's still kind of innocent in a way. *Cowboy Heaven* is a good example of the mechanisms that I use, that is, to take an average focal character — not heroic, but a guy who has human limitation — and put him in a situation which is innately embarrassing. It's somebody else's stupidity and he's stuck with it. I've used that over and over again, because I think that's what society does to most people. You're stuck having to explain why your boss makes a faulty product, or if you work in a restaurant, why the food's no good. You're the front man and taking it for somebody back there behind the scenes. I suppose it's a comic opera version of what Phil Dick is trying to do, that kind of conspiracy, that who's really doing what to whom kind of

thing. So in *Cowboy Heaven* this guy has let himself do something that is basically stupid and he's stuck with this thing, and anything can happen and usually does. The obvious symbolism for him there is that the robot is like the albatross around the neck, the symbol of everything that's wrong with his life. He finally comes to grips with that and changes, but whether it's up to the reader to decide, or it's something for me to decide in another book, I don't know yet.

Amazing: The reason it worked for Voltaire and it works now is that the naive character can be used to bounce much of society off of.

Goulart: Oh sure. My favorite kind of hook, and that can be an insidious thing too, is the picaresque. The first book that I ever did that anybody paid attention to was *After Things Fell Apart* (and that's Terry Carr's title, by the way, which I have come to like), and I won an Edgar nomination from the Mystery Writers of America for it. There are very great similarities between the picaresque and the private eye novel, because it has a guy going from place to place having these various adventures, and in the private eye novel they're loosely tied together because he's looking for the killer or the Maltese Falcon. I talked about this with Bill Nolan, of Logan's *Run* fame, and he pointed out that Max Brand used to write books like that, with what he called the citadel plot. You're getting from here to the stronghold of the villain. As the canard says, getting there is half the fun. In my books getting there is all the fun. That's the danger in *After Things Fell Apart*. Once you get to the villain you say, "Oh, so what?" But that's true in most mysteries. The denouement is always disappointing, because it's so exciting, especially with Raymond Chandler, up to the point you say "It's him." The reader says, "Oh, okay." The air kind of goes out of the thing. That's why I've tried to vary the plots. But essentially, the best plot for me is one where somebody has to go somewhere and do something across an interesting landscape or an interesting society. If the thing he has to do is dangerous or embarrassing or both, or if they're trying to kill him, all the better. I did another book called *Wildesmith* a few years ago, which is similar to *Cowboy Heaven*. It dealt with an android author, and somebody had put a bomb inside the android to assassinate

somebody. So the hero had two problems: he had to maintain the pretense that this was a real person he was with, and he had to keep from blowing up. I'm very fascinated with the mechanics of suspense and mystery, so I tend to mix them with science fiction, even though I've had editors annoyed with it. Asimov does that, and Fredric Brown did it in the past, producing science fiction detective stories, or mysteries with fantasy elements. Again, none of this plays fair with the reader, I guess, which is why there is some annoyance from some circles.

Amazing: A mystery with fantasy elements should be fiendishly difficult to do, but a science fiction mystery shouldn't be too hard, as I see it, as long as you state your premises ahead of time instead of suddenly coming into the locked room through the fourth dimension.

Goulart: I've never done anything like that. I've always followed the rules, but I get the feeling that sometimes there is a certain kind of reader who wants a mystery to be a mystery and a science fiction novel to be a science fiction novel and deliver certain ingredients. Of course, I've always been dedicated to going against the grain, and if I get the feeling that somebody's annoyed with something — like a kid, you know, they say, "stop doing that!" — and you do it more. I'm as aware of my books, I think, as the reviewers or editors. I say, yeah, I'm in a rut, and I don't want to do this, but on the other hand when you find a format, you stick with it. I think *Cowboy Heaven* is the best book I've done in several years because it does exactly what I wanted it to do, which was to have fun. It has what I think is a basically good idea, which is a plot centered on keeping John Wayne alive. Just the week the book came out, he was in the hospital dying. I tried to figure out some tasteful way to tie in the publicity, but I couldn't come up with anything.

Amazing: Particularly since he didn't die on schedule.

Goulart: We don't know if he did. This may be an android replacing him now (which has broken down since the time this interview was conducted — D.S.).

Amazing: If you can make one of him, you can make several.

Goulart: That's right. I have another story about that which I haven't sold yet. The other obvious thing is that there never was

a real John Wayne and they're all androids. That was the premise of *Wildesmith*. *Wildesmith* was not real. He was always an android, and they didn't want anybody to find out. I think the whole basic notion goes back to when I was working in advertising. That was the way I felt, that I was stuck with these ridiculous products that I had to write about, and I didn't believe in them as time went on. It's like losing your faith, like being a priest without a religion and saying you think you can fake this until it's time for retirement and you can collect Social Security. But my focal people, my heroes, usually end up saying, "No I can't." They may be fools up to a certain point, but sooner or later they say, "I can't take this shit anymore," or "I'm going to expose this," or "I'm going to try to stop it." Basically I think I have the beliefs out of the 1940's pulp magazines. Despite the fact I tend to look cynical, my people usually tend to be sentimental softies and usually end up making conservative moral decisions at the ends of the books.

Amazing: Did you come to such a conclusion when you left advertising?

Goulart: I don't think I came to it consciously, but it was a great relief to finally be free. It was like escaping from Devil's Island. For the first few years you hear those bloodhounds and those chains rattling at night and you think they've found you. I quit a dozen years ago, but until that time I had quit full-time but I was still backsliding and I worked a couple days a week or doing freelance work. I was a terrific copywriter. I was one of the best copywriters on the west coast for what they used to call offbeat copy. So people would come to me and say, "Hey write this." If I had pushed that I would be the vice president or president of my own agency by now, which would have been frightening, but it would have been lucrative as hell. That's one reason why my family and I settled in Connecticut. I wanted to get away from that temptation of being pulled back into advertising. They'd come after me and they'd tempt me with money. A lot of it was fun. I got to go to Hollywood and make commercials and be back stage, and all that showbiz. A friend of mine I worked with in advertising always called it peripheral show business. That's what it is. You are on the edge, but you aren't quite in it, but you are close enough to smell it and see it. It's very tempting. Plus the money is

very good and it can be fun, but sometimes it isn't, and unfortunately publishing on the higher levels can get like that. There are so many committees. It's not just an editor. It's an editor and a salesman and the board of directors. When you're talking about a big money book you're talking about I don't know how many people going over it and talking about it. As I say, it's just like advertising, but then the main thing that I've learned over the years is that everything is just like advertising. So I got that out of the way early. I learned advertising at an early age and it's always helped me.

Amazing: Norman Spinrad has said that much modern book publishing is like prose television.

Goulart: Sure. Everything is selling a product. The only thing you can hold on to, what I try to do and where I get stubborn sometimes, at least for anything I do under my own name, is to see that the product with my name on it is something that I'm satisfied with and proud of and it represents my best shot. I don't mean my best shot at big money. As I say, *Cowboy Heaven* is a very satisfying book. It's something I've wanted to do and I think I've done it well, and it works. I'm very happy with it, but I don't think it'll be on the best seller list. I wish it would be, but I don't think it's going to quite get there. Still, that's a satisfying product to me. But it is a product, and where the system falls down in this case is that there's no budget to advertise it. There's no mechanism to promote it. It is frustrating to me as an ex-advertising person to see some of these opportunities missed a lot of times. You have a book come out and you say, "Oh boy, if I had a few thousand bucks could I push that thing." So I don't think of myself as an artist who is struggling unappreciated ahead of my time or behind my time. I consider myself a commercial writer, but I think you can do satisfying stuff in the commercial area. That's what I've always tried to do, and I think some of what I learned in advertising can be applied here. I'm very very much tangled up with media anyway. As you say, in *Cowboy Heaven* it's all an intricate thing about television and Hollywood and fantasy Hollywood. I worked in Hollywood for three or four years on the fringes, and this is a kind of fantasy based on what I saw, what I thought, and what I imagined all mixed into one.

Amazing: To what extent would you say that bestsellers are made, not written? *The Sword of Shannara*, for instance, would have gotten absolutely nowhere without the hype.

Goulart: I haven't read the book, but you always feel they're paying too much attention to him and not enough to me. It's the sibling's lament. I'm not saying I wouldn't participate in something like that if I were offered enough. I've done a lot of different kinds of books. I would not be above doing something purely for exploitation and making a lot of money. It's not that I'm struggling at this point, but it's like getting to the foothills and seeing the next plateau. I've never gotten to a plateau where I say, okay, this is where I'm going to build my mansion. I'm building a temporary camp. I'm always going to go one thing higher. That's the way it is like advertising. You're always tempted by so many possibilities. You say maybe if I did this kind of book or that kind, maybe I could quadruple my income. But my basic thing would be to take a book like *Cowboy Heaven* and have it become a vast bestseller. It's always easier to say, "Well, what do they want and how can we give them more of it?" than say "What have I got?" The people I worked with would say, "What has the product got that we can romance?" rather than "What does the public want that we can promise them that we have?" It's two different things. You can even take a negative aspect, and say our product is the only one with rat hair or something in it, and if you can make people think that's good for them, you're set. Now we have these products which say additives are good for you; they cure cancer and so forth; and ours has more additive than anybody else's and it becomes a positive thing. Our radiation is good for you.

Amazing: If you wrote books strictly to give them more of what they want, wouldn't this get rather tedious after a while?

Goulart: Sure, I guess . . . But what keeps you from going crazy there is that if you're getting two or three hundred thousand dollars for one book, you don't have to write as many. You write one every two years, and change as the fashions do. Maybe the book they want this year is a Stephen King and next year it's a Robert Ludlum and the year after that it's some other luminary. If you had to write six or

eight of them a year you'd go bananas. My ambition has always been to have a Ron Goulart be a type of book, and have people say "Give me a Ron Goulart". Like a candy bar or something. I haven't reached that stage, at least not beyond the walls of science fiction conventions yet.

Amazing: One thing Lundwall said was that you had become a genre unto yourself.

Goulart (laughs): Yes, but I don't think he meant that as a positive thing necessarily. Nobody writes a Ron Goulart book like I do. I guess that's true. But somebody told me they'd seen a couple that looked like they were inspired by mine. I haven't read them, so I don't know.

Amazing: Could you use the advertising approach and turn that into something positive?

Goulart: I suppose I could. The problem is at this stage, when you're freelancing, you're living in several time zones at once. You're thinking about the book that came out last month, the one that's coming out next year, the one you're working on now that you have a contract for, the one you're trying to sell. It's very difficult to make yourself live in the present, which is the essential thing to do. So once a book comes out — once it's out of the egg you throw it out of the nest and go lay some more eggs. I have not had the time or the organization to say I'm going to stop and I'm going to take *Cowboy Heaven* and tour the country, or do this and this with it. It's like leaving it on the doorstep of the church and hoping someone will take care of it. I'd like to do more followup, even on my own. I'd much rather have it done with the financing of a publisher. Even now the average science fiction book doesn't get promoted; only the ones they think are the most exploitable.

Amazing: Do you think it would be possible to take one of your books and promote it outside of science fiction and turn it into a bestseller?

Goulart: Oh, sure. It could be done. I don't know if anybody will ever do it. Most people that I know as personal friends or associates don't even read science fiction, period. It's like I don't take dope or I don't drink. Once in a while when I meet somebody and they get interested enough in the fact that I'm a writer they'll go out and buy one of the books and read the damn thing. Always they'll say, "Hey! I like that, and I

don't like science fiction." All it means is that if you got a hundred thousand people who aren't science fiction fanatics to read it, they might like it. That would be true of a lot of science fiction books, not just mine. The guy I always thought should have been a major writer in America in terms of sales is Phil Dick, and I don't think he is. I think he's one of the best writers going. He should be where Vonnegut is, because

he's that good, but somehow he never got out of the category. He's a major writer inside the category, but not outside of it. There, I think, the label does hurt. On the other hand the label helps. It helps sell those books to the libraries, particularly hardcovers like *Cowboy Heaven*. If that came out as a mainstream novel it would probably sell eight copies once it was promoted. You're always gambling. A non-category novel could just get lost and nobody could ever see it. There have been novels that have sold fifteen copies. At least with science fiction you're guaranteed a few thousand people will see it.

Amazing: With Dick it's often been a case of wrong publishers, some obscure paperback outfit that will let the book go out of print and stay there.

Goulart: When *The Man in the High Castle* came out, I remember seeing the reviews he got. The SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE gave it a whole page, and people were very enthusiastic about it. Somehow that should have launched him beyond where he was. I guess it did for a while, but somehow the follow through wasn't there. I feel I've reached that stage even in terms of the general public.

Amazing: Do you also see a problem that the largest audience is the lowest common denominator audience and you really don't want to write for them?

Goulart: Yeah, but if you can get John Cheever number one or two on the best seller list — I think Cheever is one of the best writers in the country, but he's certainly not a white bread, apple pie kind of writer. And even Borges, for Christ's sake, probably sells pretty well, although not on the best seller list. There's a lot of strange writers who suddenly take off without compromising or writing mass media stuff. Look, every writer in the world thinks he could reach a larger audience. I'm sure Harold Robbins does if he only had something or other that he doesn't have. My ex-

perience has been — I've hit **PLAYBOY** and **PENTHOUSE** and other magazines — that my type of science fiction does appeal to a wider audience when they're exposed to it. It satisfies a wider audience.

Amazing: Have you ever had any direct experience with the promotional end of publishing?

Goulart: With any big publisher, it's so intricate and labyrinthine that even your editor doesn't know what's going to happen to your book sometimes. Some editors don't even know what the jacket's going to be, and sometimes somebody else writes the copy that goes on the jacket, so it's such a team thing that sometimes with a big publisher, when you go up and ask to see your editor, the people at the reception desk don't know who they are. The main thing that seems to be lacking in many cases is any sense of coordination, and that's because there's no time for coordination. You just keep putting out these products and hope for the best. One reason that writers go to conventions and write for fanzines is to somehow make themselves stand out from the mass. I have a vision of these books coming down the production line and going into this bottomless pit somewhere. Everybody's striving to just get out of that pit for a little while, including me.

Amazing: If Lundwall can claim you're a genre unto yourself, you must have, which does make it complimentary. Do you think you have gotten out of the pit?

Goulart: No. My most positive image would be I'm hanging at the edge of it by my fingers with my book in my teeth, trying to get it out of the hole, but there's people pulling at your feet from below and stepping on your hands from above. Yeah, my stuff is certainly better known now than it was ten or fifteen years ago, but I've written a hell of a lot of stuff since then. I was a virgin in terms of novels until I was like thirty-five. I really originally wanted to be the last self-supporting short story writer in America, and I just couldn't do it. So I feel I am still learning with novels. I haven't reached my peak. I've written a lot of them, but I've written them over the last ten years. I don't want to wait that long to be an international celebrity, but in five or ten years I'll be better than I am now.

Amazing: Would it be possible to write a comic novel around the image of the production line and the pit?

Goulart: I've thought about it. I've got a book in the works now — I haven't sent it out — about the comic strip business and the ins and outs of that. But so far the only thing that I've done that really deals with publishing is that series I've been doing off and on for **FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION** about Jose' Silvera the freelance writer, which projects in a fantastic and neurotic way all the tribulations of a freelance writer. The greatest thing about Silvera is he's big and tough and six feet four, and he beats these people up if they don't pay him. When you're a five foot four writer that's a very satisfying character to write about.

Amazing: You mentioned comic strips. How did you get involved with *Star Hawks*?

Goulart: I don't know if you've heard, but I've just been relieved of my command there. I was fired about three weeks ago. So right now we're in the middle of legal proceedings, so until it's settled I'd rather not talk too much about the strip except to say, yeah, I was asked to create a strip and I did it. Unfortunately, the comic strip business being even more primitive than anything else in publishing, I had to sign away ownership. Consequently at any point they can take it away from me, which is what happened for various reasons. I'll go into it in my memoirs or someplace else.

Amazing: What would you like to do in science fiction that you haven't done yet?

Goulart: Let's see. Win the Hugo and Nebula (laughs). Well, what I'd like to do and what I probably will do may be two different things. I think many editors ask when you're going to write a really big, ambitious novel. I suppose that is one of the things I am thinking about, although I think *Cowboy Heaven* is a small ambitious novel. I think I am unfortunately cursed with the ability to do more concisely what other people do at greater length. So my book is like one of those Japanese flowers you drop into a glass of water and they blossom into great big things. My whole training in comics, in advertising, and my natural inclination in writing is to be either concise or at least terse. So it's really difficult for me to write a five hundred page novel. It would really have to be two two-hundred page novels spliced together at this point.

Amazing: Or a three volume fantasy trilogy.

Goulart: That's the other thing. Or an illustrated book, which seems the other possibility.

Amazing: Have you ever had any direct involvement with Hollywood?

Goulart: The year started off very exuberantly. I got called a couple months ago by the Disney studios and they were interested in *The Wicked Cyborg*, doing it as a movie and a TV series. And while we were talking about that, one of the production units with Columbia Pictures wrote to me about the same book. At the moment nothing at all has happened, and as with all those Hollywood things, nothing probably ever will, but that book particularly seems to have turned on several people out there. *Cowboy Heaven* is now being offered, but I haven't heard anything. That's through an agency that Doubleday has. I've got a couple people in the last six months who want to do some of my short stories as experimental films — NET kind of things. This is not solid. If they can get this grant, they'll make these films. But in the last year I've had much more interest than I've had in the last ten. My feeling is that eventually one of these will go through, because obviously the more people in Hollywood who know who you are, the more chance you have.

Amazing: Either that, or you just cash the option checks.

Goulart: When you start getting to real options, yeah, but now we're just at the "Is it available for option?" kind of discussion. It's flattering, but you can't cash those anywhere. Yeah, I've always been fascinated since I was a kid by the visual, by the comics, by movies, and I tend to use a lot of quick cuts and opening on a closeup or a long shot or something in the novels. I think anybody who grew up in the 1930's has to be movie-zonked and have your head turned around by the films. Plus I listened to the radio a lot as a kid. Between the visuals from the movies and dialogue from the radio — more reasons why I've always tried to be concise.

Amazing: From all this it would seem you'd be a natural for screenwriting.

Goulart: That I've never tried. When I was much younger, about twenty years ago, a friend of mine and I were living and struggling in Hollywood. He was working for TV GUIDE magazine. Harlan was out there, just beginning to crack television, and he

was giving us a hand. We tried for about a year to get an assignment to write TV. We got all the usual runaround and lunches with people, and "Gee, we all love you over at the studio, you're the next whoever" and at the end of the year we hadn't sold anything. So I just pulled out of it. It's not one of my major ambitions. I'd rather do a book and let somebody else buy it and make the movie.

Amazing: The advantage of the book is the committee isn't in the creation of it.

Goulart: A book like *Cowboy Heaven* is really like making your own movie in your head. Nobody can tell me who to cast or how to shoot the scene or where to put my camera or what kind of dialogue to have or whether or not the characters can screw. Well of course now you have to have them screwing if it's a current movie. That's the insidious thing about this. It's a lot of fun to do a book like that and I don't want to lose that by going into some other category where I can't have as much fun. The two things I want to do are make a lot of money and have a lot of fun.

Amazing: Doesn't this same insidious thing creep into science fiction when it becomes bestseller material?

Goulart: My idea is to become just on the edge of being fabulously wealthy, so I just miss that complete sellout. I'm out of that pit, but I'm not trapped elsewhere. It's a thing that everybody who freelances tries to do, to strike a balance between what you want to do and making a living.

Amazing: I think many try to become so popular they can do anything they want. When they achieve this, some writers become very good while the others become self-indulgent.

Goulart: I've become very good so far. I don't know if I've become self-indulgent. I always talk about myself and my work as if it's a process, an on-going thing. In two years I may have an entirely different outlook. Different things will be emphasized. It's like what the body does. You get rid of those old cells and get new ones, so in ten years it's a new body. The same way with my career. In ten years, who knows? I don't like to commit myself to long-term plans about what I'm going to be doing in another decade, or even in another five years or something. This is again maybe a negative thing, but that seems to be the way I approach it. ●

VELIKOVSKY: VISIONS OF COSMIC CATASTROPHE

By Britton Bloom

THE SOLAR system in chaos... planets colliding and jumping to new orbits... Earth devastated by cosmic collisions... civilizations collapsing... people dying by the millions while planets duel in the heavens...

Such is the picture presented by Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky in his *Worlds in Collision*. The book, published in 1950, stirred a controversy that extended beyond the normal bounds of scientific debate into personal attacks on Velikovsky and economic threats against his publishers. That controversy followed Velikovsky from the time *Worlds* was published until his death in November of 1979.

Velikovsky's heresy remains as an idea, but not as a serious theory. When the Pioneer-Venus II probe found a high percentage of Argon in the atmosphere of Venus, one of the project scientists joked that maybe Velikovsky was right about Jupiter having given birth to Venus.

In essence, Velikovsky wrote that Venus "erupted" from the surface of Jupiter and became a comet, circling the sun through the orbits of the inner planets. Venus, as a comet, brushed against Earth twice and finally knocked Mars out of its orbit (as the second planet). Mars itself nearly collided with Earth — and did hit the moon — on its way to its present location, while Venus took up residence as a regularly orbiting planet.

Earth and its inhabitants suffered greatly from these planetary encounters. The surface of the Earth convulsed, new mountains rose as the crust buckled, land masses sank under the sea (including possibly Atlantis), climates reversed as desert lands became lush forests and jungles dried to deserts.

Velikovsky arrived at his theories by a long and circuitous route. Born in Russia in 1895, he studied medicine and graduated from a Moscow medical school in

1921. Then began a period of wandering and experimenting with other professions until he settled in Israel in the 1930s as a psychoanalyst.

Freud's work fascinated him, and he planned to write a book on Freud's study of Moses and the beginnings of Jewish monotheism. But his own studies of Old Testament writings and Egyptian documents led Velikovsky to believe the events described in the Pentateuch were not metaphoric myths, but actual historical events.

Sometime around 1500 B.C., Velikovsky wrote, Earth entered the tail of the then-comet Venus and was covered with a red iron-like dust from the tail. Thus began a series of catastrophes that changed the Earth and its peoples more than any other event in historic times.

Although he was led to his conclusions by Biblical and Egyptian sources, Velikovsky scoured the world's myths to find other cultures that recorded the catastrophes and found a pattern of similar stories from all areas of the globe.

The red dust that showered the Earth, poisoning rivers and making men sick appears in stories as rains of blood, rivers turning to blood and the Earth turning red. The Babylonians spoke of a shower of blood when the heavenly monster Tiamat was wounded in battle; the *Manuscript Quiche'*, a book of Mayan hieroglyphs, records a time when the Earth was red; the Egyptian writer Ipuwer wrote that rivers turned to blood; and the Finnish epic *Kalevala* reports a rain of red milk.

The Book of Exodus paints a vivid picture of Egypt in the grip of the red plague: the Nile turned to blood, killing the fish so that the river stank, men scratched shallow wells to try to get drinking water, boils and sickness claimed men and cattle.

As Earth moved deeper into the tail of the comet, the red dust changed to a hail of stones that destroyed the grain in the fields and knocked houses down. The hail of stones is also recorded in Mexico's *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* and stories of other Indian tribes.

Hydrocarbons in Venus' atmosphere entered the Earth's skies, according to Velikovsky, and ignited when they came into contact with free oxygen. The terrifying sight of the sky burning or rains of fire again appear in stories around the world. The sacred Mayan book, *Popol-Vuh*, the

Manuscript Quiche', and the *Annals of Cuauhtlan* record the fire in the New World; the Siberian Vogul peoples have similar stories, as do the tribes of the East Indies, Babylon, Persia (Iran), and Egypt. Velikovsky noted that all the peoples who have stories of a rain of fire live in areas over large oil deposits, and theorized that the Earth's own oil was supplemented by "star oil" from Venus.

As the Earth neared Venus itself, its rotation slowed, even stopped, and this too is recorded throughout the world. Egypt, Finland and the American Indian cultures all record a period of three to nine days when the sun never rose and the world was covered with darkness. If part of the world was plunged into a long night, then part would see a day that did not end, and Velikovsky reports the legends of the Chinese Emperor Yehou record sunlight for ten days with no night.

The gravitational attraction of Venus, whose mass is nearly equal to Earth's, drew the oceans to a monumental high tide miles high. China, Peru and the North American Indians all tell of the ocean reaching into the sky. Even in the Middle East the water was drawn away. Velikovsky believed the parting of the Red Sea for the Hebrews fleeing Pharaoh's army was a result of Venus' effect on the water.

Then, at the point when Earth was closest to Venus, an electric discharge flashed between the two worlds. The great spark that arced across space "broke" the spell of Venus; the waters of the world fell back in tidal waves of immense height, flooding the land; the Red Sea crashed down upon Pharaoh and his army (and some of the slower Hebrews) ending the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. Earth and Venus began to move apart.

The devastation was enough to have destroyed Earth but for one gift of Venus; the hydrocarbons in the comet's tail that burned across the world now precipitated in a dew of carbohydrates — the "manna from heaven" — that fed people until the earth became fertile once more.

With Venus in retreat, humanity must have breathed a sigh of relief and began the job of putting the world back together. Kings ordered their scholars to keep a watchful eye on Venus.

That watchful eye was necessary. Fifty years after the first brush Venus returned, again bringing destruction to Earth.

Once again the rain of stones devastated men and the Earth's axis tilted. The Earth stopped in its rotation leaving the sun standing still while the Hebrews, under the leadership of Joshua, fought the Canaanites at Beth-horon. While the Middle East was lighted in this long day, Mexican chroniclers reported a long night.

After these visits by Venus, religious cults devoted to the "bright star" sprang up. Men watched the night sky for signs from the destructive goddess. But the comet continued to orbit the sun without incident for centuries.

Then in the early part of the eighth century B.C. Babylonian astronomers saw the "bright goddess" rise in the west, then disappear for nine months before rising again in the east. Venus dropped out of sight again for two months, and vanished once more in the next year for eleven days. Other peoples noticed the irregularities of Venus' orbit, particularly the Hebrew prophet Amos, who predicted cosmic tragedies — floods, a dark sun, melting land.

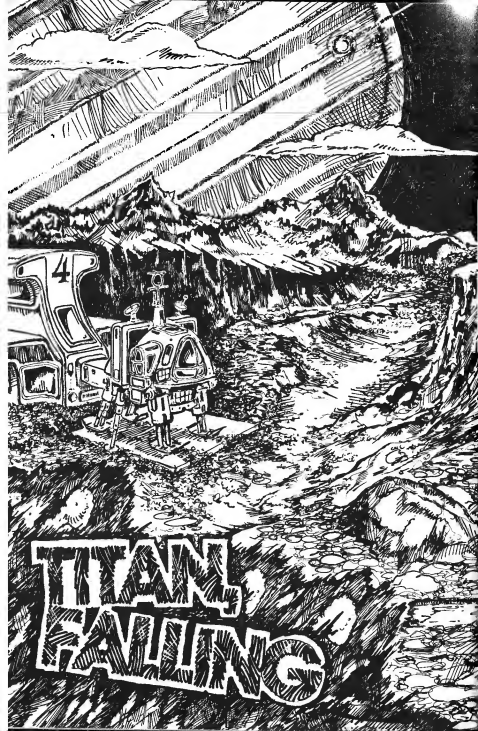
But instead of the Earth, Mars was the planet that Venus struck. Mars, less massive than Earth, could not withstand the force of Venus' impact; the red planet was knocked out of its orbit and became another "wanderer" in the sky.

Mars then brushed by the Earth in 721 B.C. Being smaller than Venus, Mars did not have the destructive power of the larger comet, but the brush with Mars did tilt the Earth's axis ten degrees and knock the Earth into a wider orbit, lengthening the year. After leaving the Earth, Mars hit the moon, melting its surface and setting off the volcanic activity which covered its surface with lava.

The expert astronomers of Babylon had calculated the year as being 360 days. With the new tilt and wider orbit, a new calendar was needed and Emperors ordered their astronomers to revise the outdated calendars.

It was about this time (mid-eighth century B.C.) that the new cultures of Greece and Rome were being founded. The older Mycenaean Greek civilization was destroyed at this time, leaving room for the gentler Ionian Greeks whose civilization gave the world its science and philosophy.

Tradition places the founding of Rome at 747 B.C., very near the time of Mars' brush with earth. The warlike Romans al-



TITAN FALLING

by Gregory Benford



don holcombe ©
1980

Prologue

I WROTE this story in 1975, trying to work the material into a form fitting the character. The newest observations of Titan, Saturn's large moon, had prompted me to write articles about it for *NATURAL HISTORY* and *AMAZING*. (The *NATURAL HISTORY* piece was eventually reprinted in an encyclopedia's yearly survey volume; it was a hot topic then). I wanted to combine the fascinating possibility of a natural, God-given low temperature organic chemistry lab (on a MOON, no less), with a study of an aging character. I wrote it by hand while attending a series of physics conferences, scribbling on airplanes and in hotel rooms.

About this time, Gordon Eklund and I were trying to finish a novel we'd been working on for four years. After I concluded the first draft of this story, I realized that it fitted well into the texture of the novel. So I went ahead and rewrote it, fitting details into the earlier chapters of the novel. Putnam bought the novel; Gollancz did the hardback in Britain; and it's been published in Japan and Germany and

some other countries as well. Not until late 1979 did I remember the original novelette. I pulled it out of the file. It seemed to me that the story stood well by itself, and I felt an odd tug to give it a life separate from the novel, *IF THE STARS ARE GODS*. Gordon and I had won a Nebula for the original story *STARS* is based on, and that had overshadowed the other aspects of the book for me. There are facets of Bradley Reynolds, the lead character of *STARS*, which disappeared when I rewrote "Titan, Falling," and I would like to see them appear separate from the novel.

Berkley-Putnam tells me they're going to withdraw the paperback edition, and reissue it with a new cover, more promotion, etc. in 1981. Since the book won't be available until then, this seemed a good time to publish the original novelette. The full novel has, of course, more impact. But authors have odd relationships with their own characters, and something in Bradley wanted to have this last chance to speak.—Gregory Benford.

*An aged man is but a paltry thing
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing . . .*
—W.B. Yeats

OUTSIDE, TITAN tilted.

Bradley Reynolds watched passively, letting the pitch of the Walker roll him in little oscillations on his bunk bed. He had wedged his neck into the pillow so that he faced squarely out the port: With the room lights darkened, the Titan landscape gained detail and color. He could make out jutting shelves of rock that broke through the reddish ice. Dingy snow clung in crevices, pocked with gravel. All was bathed in a penetrating red glow — the roiling cloud ceiling above, the glimmering pinnacles of ammonia ice, the weathered boulders.

The scene tilted again. The Walker settled with a pneumatic wheeze. Bradley recognized the heavy thump as the forward legs thrust out; they found a purchase and the Walker lurched forward. He felt the momentum damped by the shock absorbers and then the rear legs swung ponderously forward, bringing the floor back to level.

A hell of a clumsy way to get around. How much easier, in this fractional gravity and dense atmosphere, to use the helicopters — jet-assisted, triple sensor navigation, fast. The copters had opened Titan to full exploration, and Bradley had assumed he would visit a few of the crystal lattice sites in them. But he had

not anticipated Najima, the nominal chief of Kuper Base.

Bradley raised his eyebrows wryly; his instincts must be getting rusty. He had specifically announced that he was retiring to the compartment for a nap, knowing that Najima was bursting with frustration and would inevitably squawk too much to the others — and then, soothed by the gently rocking cradle of the Walker, he had actually dozed off himself. Good strategy — lousy tactics.

He lowered his legs over the side of the bunk bed. He had long ago developed a sense of possible danger all elderly people possess, a perception of unbalanced forces and movements acting through a fragile, brittle axis. Ankles, knees, the base of his spine — flaws in the armor. He spread his feet wide against the turgid sway of the deck and made three steps to the hatchway. The hatch swung back easily. He dogged it on the wall and peered through the gap.

The three of them sat in bucket chairs. Before them opened the transparent hemisphere of the Walker. The landscape seemed to curve and compress around them, refracted by the thick, transparent organiform port. As she studied the shifting terrain, Mara seemed pensive. Tsubata and Najima were talking. Najima alone manipulated the Walker's controls.

"—do not have a precise fix on the blowout point yet," Najima was saying in his clipped, breezy way. "If the sliding continues—"

"Enough to justify turning back?" Tsubata said.

"No. The subsidence is forty-three kilometers—" Najima pointed "—that way."

"Not close enough for a fracture line to reach us?" Mara spoke dispassionately.

"We've never measured a fracture locus so odd." Najima swiveled his chair toward Mara. Bradley ducked hastily out of sight. "I wish we had. Then I could quite easily take this old man back to Kuiper and be done with him."

"You mean," said Tsubata, "you'd have a pretext then."

"A solid reason," Najima said stiffly. "I do not deal in pretexts."

"This whole Walker idea is a pretext," Mara said flatly.

Najima bristled. "How?"

"You want to show off the part of Titan you've studied most," Mara said lightly, as though the answer were obvious. "So you pretend this clanking Walker is safer than a copter."

"If I must explain again—"

"Don't. I didn't buy that guff the first time and this trip proves me right."

"A Walker cannot tip over."

"No, but it can't levitate, can it? When a fissure opens under it?"

"Unlikely. Most improbable. And I object to your word, pretext. Where—"

"Look, Najima, I don't give a holy damn how—"

"—whereas, I know copters can be dangerous now, when the storms are building."

"They have good pilots."

"We've lost four men and a woman. The winds—"

Mara snorted. "How many in Walkers?"

"Ah, a few."

"Or several?" Mara laughed and Tsubata, usually imperturbable, made a growling sound of mirth.

"Very well," said Najima. "In all, four. A rock ledge sheared away and crushed them."

"The prosecution," said Mara, "rests."

Najima plowed on with an explanation, but Bradley turned and moved carefully back to his bunk, out of sight. It was amusing to hear Mara at work on Najima, but he had already guessed nearly all of what they'd inadvertently revealed. He lowered himself tenderly into the welcoming embrace of the bunk. He was looking out the port again at a weathered brown pinnacle when the voices suddenly swelled in volume.

"All right," Najima was saying sharply. "I am trying to keep close tabs on him. For his own good."

"To be sure he doesn't collapse on you," Tsubata said gruffly.

"Of course. His death here would reflect badly—"

"How bothersome," Mara said sarcastically.

"—on all of us," Najima finished pointedly.

"What you don't follow, Najima, is that Bradley is here for personal reasons, not as an official inspection," Mara said.

"But he said—"

"A pretext. You didn't invent deceit, you know."

"For what?" Najima sounded genuinely puzzled.

"He doesn't give a damn about the efficiency of Kuiper Base," Tsubata said.

"Or your executive talents," Mara added. "He wants to see the lattice. That's all."

"We send holographic—"

"No pictures. Bradley wants the experience. He has an odd way about these things. He . . ." Her voice teetered uncertainly.

"Reynolds can frange his tourist impulses," Najima said savagely.

"He's a certified Grand Old Man. Fine. But he's a guest here. He cannot tell me what to do on Titan."

"Bradley is a damned great scientist—do I need to remind you about the two Nobels? He simulated the complete evolutionary chain, from simple chemicals to the proto-DNAs. He's shown how life comes out of *nothing*," Mara said. "Now he wants to see Titan's superconducting crystals—he thinks they may be another form of life entirely, completely outside the scope of what he's done. What's the harm—"

"We don't know they're superconducting," Najima said. "Not everywhere in the matrix."

"You have a genius for sliding away from the point," Mara said.

"What is the point?" Najima said sharply. "Coming here, wasting my time? I thought I had to make a good impression on this old man if I wanted to get a bigger budget. Hell, twenty-eight men operating out of Kuiper Base can't —"

"Before you fuse off entirely," Mara said, "remember that we didn't want him to come out here, either."

"You are right," Tsubata said to Najima. "He is too old for this."

"You should have stopped him," Najima murmured.

Mara shrugged. "Earthside allowed him to boost from Luna to Jupiter, even though those ammonia regions inside the atmosphere proved barren of life. They felt they owed it to him. Bradley sat on Luna, working well into his 80's, simulating Jupiter for decades. It was he who finally explained why life can't make it there—the convection currents from high to low temperature zones, too fast to let even the Reynolds Spores reproduce. So he got his final trip to Jupiter, a swan song, with us as assistants. But he had to see Titan, too. Hell, he's a *titan* himself. A titan to Titan. All the way out from Jove, under high boost, he talked *only* about Titan. Even when he received a message from

Earthside—"

Mara's abrupt halt brought a silence filled by the heaving thump of the Walker's ponderous progress.

"Go on," Najima said. "What did the message—?"

"How long has that hatch been open?" Mara said, her voice rising.

Bradley heard the thump of boots crossing the deck and immediately shut his eyes. He sensed a presence at the hatchway. "It's all right," Mara said in a stage whisper.

He rolled over and said in a blurred voice as though from sleep, "Come in."

Mara grinned, the expression filling her face with compressed energy. She stepped in and dogged the hatch.

"A very neat dodge," Bradley said.

"What . . . ?"

"Deflecting his attention after you gave away the fact that we got that squirt from Earthside."

"It was that obvious?"

"To me, yes. But you're not exactly transparent. You never told me you'd read that transmission. It was clearly labeled for my eyes only."

"Well—"

"Never mind. So you know they've ordered me back."

"Yes. But they had no right when you were halfway to Saturn to pull the rug—"

"They have every right. I didn't tell them I'd left the Orb until we were out of Jupiter orbit."

"But to recall you for this one infraction—"

He smiled and waved a brownish, spotted hand in the air. "Merely an excuse. The Anti-Senility Acts prevented them from retiring me once I'd finished the Jovian simulations. But to leave Jupiter? Take an unauthorized passenger flight on the regular supply shuttle to Titan?" He made a clucking noise with his tongue and shook his head sorrowfully. "They have me, Mara. I'm a plucked goose." He boosted himself up in the bunk, grunting, and the sallow slack folds of his face formed a wry smile.

"They *can't*—"

"They can. Most easily."

"What will you do?"

"Go back. It was a fluke that I got to the Orb at all. Maybe I should have stayed there and continued my work . . ."

She leaned against the seamed blue bulkhead, arms at first folded tightly under her breasts, then hands moving to her hips and then securely wedged behind her, snug in the twin spaces between the wall and the small of her back. "You can't be sure. Maybe they'll ask you to step down and take a lesser role."

"Mara, life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient data. I know that despite my prominence in the media back Earthside, they can get me on this one."

All this, he thought, for one possible glimpse at something truly new. One shot, before the game was over. *I grow old, I grow old, I will wear my trousers rolled*, he thought. It had been decades since he'd read Eliot — an adolescent enthusiasm — but the lines sprang too easily to mind.

He felt a settling quiver in the Walker. Something odd in the cadence made Mara halt her pacing. Abruptly someone was banging on the hatch. A muffled, indecipherable shout. Mara swung the hatch free and Najima stood framed in it.

"Dr. Reynolds, I . . . come look."

Bradley rolled off the bunk again. He took it swiftly and landed with a too-casual grace. The deck had stilled and luckily he made it; he strode with erect certainty to his swivel chair. "What's on?"

"There," Najima said simply. His finger was unneeded; a ruddy blister towered on the horizon. White clouds roiled upward from its nipped peak. As they watched, fresh goutts belched from the mottled skin. Dark clusters like grapeshot spewed out with the escaping gas, arcing high into blunted parabolas and then showering downward through the thinning clouds. Black seeds against the moist flesh of a slicked apple, Bradley thought. "An ice volcano," he said.

"Precisely," Najima said. "We knew there was unrelieved stress in this area, of course. But these things cannot be predicted. You do understand?"

"I do."

"We must turn back at once—"

"No."

"My concern is with your—"

"I said no."

Najima swiveled his chair and assumed a patient, relaxed air. He laced his fingers and studied Bradley with eyes that glimmered — small, black beads. Bradley tried to think of his best move.

"You're not worried about the lava, surely?" Bradley said. Often it was better to give an opponent a simple question to answer, to gain time for thought.

Najima accepted the bait and launched into a thorough explanation of the eruption mechanism. Titan was a massive snowball, the crust frozen, a kernel of rock at its center. Between these solid boundaries was a great slush of dust, ice and liquid. Compression and the sputtering decay of radioactive dirt gradually warmed some regions in the snowball. Hot liquid percolated upward, pressing, and gushed forth in a lava of running methane, ammonia and water.

"Scarcely dangerous," Bradley said. "Hot by Titan's standards, granted, but still at least fifty degrees colder than we are."

Najima shook his square, close-cropped head. "The boulders flung out—"

"We don't seem to be in their vicinity," Bradley said, with his there's-a-good-fellow voice. "I can see them rolling down the flanks."

Najima's smooth dun face took on a veiled, knowing look. "Then you can see the cracking."

Bradley squinted through the thick organiform at the volcano's snout. Beyond the nearby hills, alabaster clouds writhed upward into the unchanging deck of pink. Around the curiously bloated peak, thin filaments worked down the slopes. As he watched, a few of the lines thickened. Gas puffed from one. The volcano seemed to be straining to be free of its encrusted skin, bulging and bloated. "Faults in the ice," Bradley said.

"If we fall into one . . ." Tsubata began.

"We can navigate around them," Najima said, with clipped certainty, his face a sudden mask.

"Not if they open under us," Bradley said. He smiled to himself. He was certain that Najima had intended to use the fissures as an excuse to turn back toward Kuiper Base. But the argument cut both ways, as Tsubata had anticipated and subtly indicated: any movement, toward or away from the volcano, was dangerous.

Najima tilted his square head at an awkward angle, as though thinking. "Well,

there is always . . ."

"I would suggest — realizing, sir, that this craft is of course still under your command and I am but a passenger — that we hold fast until this disturbance has subsided." Bradley spread his hands warmly.

"We can't," Najima said.

"We have supplies . . ." Mara began helpfully.

"Yes, but in a hostile environment it is foolish to run low. As we would, if we stayed here very long." Najima sat forward earnestly, his calculating mask forgotten in the desire to focus on the problem. Bradley reminded himself that Najima was, after all, an engineer first and an administrator a very poor second. "This site is not safe," Najima went on. "We rest upon an ice sheet laced through by rock. It could split."

"Not soon?" Bradley said.

"I cannot possibly predict such a thing."

"I propose we strike out for firm rock, then," Bradley said.

"I could call a copter—"

"To land on ice? That might be dangerous in itself."

"I doubt that point."

Bradley allowed his face to pinch into a cool, distant look. "How often have you tried it?"

"Why, never. We avoid such situations. As we have been instructed."

"Then you have no experience."

Reluctantly: "No."

"I wish to have the best possible impression of Kuiper Base when I return to Luna . . ."

Najima looked from Mara to Tsubata to Bradley. Technically, Najima remained in charge here. But there is a psychological force often stronger than legalisms, and the oppressive silence of the three made Najima's eyes slide away from direct contact with Bradley's. He cleared his throat with a deep grumble and said, "I believe I take your point, sir."

"Way Station Four is not too far from here," Bradley said neutrally.

"We can put in there?" Mara said.

"All our stations are secure," Najima said. He was studying Bradley, as though not quite able to keep up with the drift of things. "You seem to know a great deal about our operations, sir."

"I always do my homework," Bradley said. He kept his voice even and remote. Above all, he could not let Najima know how much hung in the balance here. If the man became suspicious he might very well beam a query Earthward. If that happened, the precious few days Bradley had left would shorten still more, and events would enclose them all.

THE WALKER made good time as it angled away from the seething volcano dome. Bradley pretended to need a rest again and returned to the pie-shaped section that was their bunk room. The Walker was a dome atop hydraulics and rocker arms, with the control cabin taking half the dome space. The rest was sliced into three storage and personnel rooms. It was an interesting commentary on humankind, Bradley thought, that the designers opted for separate rooms even though each had to be so small.

The claustrophobia of living constantly inside, sealed away from the grit and feel of Titan, would seem to call for large rooms, a feeling of airy space and expansiveness. But people wanted privacy even here. The abrasions of continual

contact proved too exhausting.

Small, small gestures in the face of the alien, he thought.

Bradley peered through the waxen transparency of the port and tried, against the waddle of the Walker, to find what he had come so far to see, the great ambiguous crystal lattices that spanned Titan. They were common near here, he knew. The Titan orbiter had missed them entirely. Beneath the crimson-brown blanket of clouds, the white filaments spun a seemingly random web. Early speculation had focused on Titan as a chill, primordial soup rich in methane and ammonia — an early Earth. The lattice did seem to incorporate some oily chain molecules, but there the analogy with Earth ended. The crystal was a simple monoclinic array in some spots, shading into complex interlocking matrices as the white strands wove through ravines and ice fields. The first manned expedition had sprinkled yellow dye near the lattice. Weeks later patches and dabs of lemon oozed forth kilometers away. There was digestion of sorts — subtle degradings of the oils the men injected — but no sign of how the energy was used. Conceivably it provided electrical power for the occasional bursts of jittery currents that laced across Titan, but even that single, simple point was still uncertain.

Bradley lay back, tired of squinting. Najima and the others at Kuiper Base expressed continual surprise in their reports at the failure of their experiments. Devising clear, accurate checks required a working hypothesis. But, even more crucially, experiments demanded that the scientific method apply in the first place. Did it, here?

Bradley was no longer so sure. Discovery often came from the raw edge of human experience, not the warm comfortable spot near the orange glow of humanity's campfire.

Was there a moral here? Revelations — and how he had hungered for them, without recognizing the appetite — came from the unexpected vector. The consensus reality was barren.

To find things alien, defined by only a dimly sensed void, should he try to catch the unexpected, to glance, crafty and quick, out of the corners of his eye?

Mara opened the hatch a fraction and peeked in expectantly. Her arched eyebrows seemed to lift her face into an expression freshly minted; he had never seen it before. A concern, unknowingly condescending, for this addled old wreck bound on his over-earnest mission?

"Come in," he boomed. "There's a limit to how much I can sleep."

"Sleep, was it?" She dogged the hatch shut. "I don't believe that."

"Oh?"

"You're figuring how to sidestep Najima. How to deal with him if he decides to turn back."

Bradley grinned. She had guessed one reason, but not the more desperate one. He said, "I don't think he will turn back."

"Check. He's daunted by you and doesn't want you to break a leg while you're under his wing. He'll hole up in Way Station Four until the volcano dies. Or until Earth denies you permission to be on Titan at all."

"Najima doesn't suspect that I'm in trouble Earthside?"

"He may."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Only that he didn't like your showing up suddenly. He thought Titan was just getting supplies from the Jupiter Orb."

"That's what I wanted him to believe."

"So that he wouldn't have time to complain Earthside?"

"That, and figure out a way to keep me confined to Kuiper Base."

Mara sat on the edge of his bunk. Her brow wrinkled above the wire-thin black eyebrows, as though she sought to see in the prism of his last sentence some converging inner part of him, his true spectrum. "You're getting pretty Byzantine, Bradley."

"By not telling Earthside I was shipping for Titan?"

"Yes. You fooled both Tsubata and me, with that fake message from Earth."

"Sorry. You're covered, though, in the records."

He folded his dry hands, now speckled with pink, and felt a cozy drowsiness seep into him. *All for a glimpse, he thought, a mere glimpse of something I may not even recognize. And I may not even get that. Najima's leash is drawing tighter.*

HOURS LATER Way Station 4 ignited its exterior lights on command, a welcoming flare in the ruddy Titan day.

A rust world, Bradley thought. A thin fraction of the visible spectrum filtered through the shroud above, giving the humped land a glow of rot. Framed by the arc lights, the Walker cast a shadow like a marching spider on a nearby slate-gray valley wall. Its clanking feet stirred puffs of dust as it backed into the station's airlock.

Najima powered-down and secured the control panel. He glanced over at Bradley. "I thought I would save you the trouble of suiting up. Our rear lock connects directly into the station."

"Thank you, but all the same, I—" Bradley stopped, realizing that the less Najima thought about the fact that Bradley carried a Titan-rated suit, the better. The illusion of helplessness would be helpful. "Are those white lines the lattice?" he said conversationally.

"Yes, I believe so. They are thick around here."

From the rear of the Walker there came the wheeze of the lock cycling and a sudden gust of bitterly cold air. Bradley shivered. The blue collar of his jumper waved limply in this fresh breath of Titan. The Walker's insulation was good, concealing the fact that the tumbled and frosted landscape outside was more than a hundred degrees below the freezing point of water. Dabs of pink ice speckled the hill; on Earth they would have blossomed into a burning gush of ammonia vapor.

Tsubata's dry voice called that the station was secured. Najima swung out of his chair, but Bradley held up a palm. "We're on a sort of rock island, aren't we?"

"A ridge jutting up through the ice, yes." Najima's blocky head bobbed in agreement. "You needn't worry — these sites are the most stable on Titan. Kuiper Base is simply the largest of them."

"They could sink."

"Unlikely, sir. These valleys have a long life."

"Like dirt in an iceberg."

"I suppose. But it is a spherical iceberg and the ocean is inside. This makes the crust relatively stable."

Bradley nodded. Given a chance, Najima's mitigating mildness broke through the varnished base-commander manner. Bradley's show of caution brought out a softer side in Najima, and during the days of confinement in this station, he could work on that facet. Unless they all relaxed and dulled their

edges, trouble lay ahead.

"I suppose the lattice knows this?" Bradley asked mildly.

"You assume it knows. That it is sentient."

"As an hypothesis."

"Unproven. We have no evidence of neural—"

"Why are they clustered in the safe areas?"

Najima's olive face furrowed. "Why, they are mostly silicates and metallic elements. It seems natural that geological forms arise—"

"—where their building blocks are abundant," Bradley finished for him.

"Of course."

"Couldn't the crystal evolve to seek out the safe areas?"

"The idea that electrochemical processes in the lattice represent life —"

"—is unfashionable," Bradley said. "So were trousers once. But what could be more reasonable, if the crystal matrix can sense the tiny shifts in Titan's crust?"

"How do we know it can?"

"We don't. If long ago there was a slight survival benefit in knowing where the land would slip and splinter, that's an evolutionary mechanism."

Najima's hooded eyes brightened. "How did you know the crystal moves?"

"I didn't. There's nothing in your reports —"

"We are not sure. We do not like to make claims before the measurements are complete."

Bradley chuckled. "Okay. Now, what's the preliminary result?"

"Some of the long chain molecules appear to trigger a slippage in the crystal planes. This propagates through the entire structure, like a ripple, and moves it a few millimeters within a year."

"So the crystal strands can migrate. The better it perceives its surroundings and understands them, the safer it becomes."

"But the crystal is one thing," Mara said. Bradley looked up. She had clearly been standing behind him and enjoying the argument. She stood hipshot and challenging, her black hair gleaming in the Walker's enameled light, her red lips like a dark emphasis.

"So?"

"One creature can't evolve," she said. "It doesn't pass on genetic material to any children. No reproduction, no selection."

Najima appeared relieved at this sudden help from an unanticipated quarter. "That is most reasonable," he said.

"Conventional wisdom again." Bradley felt suddenly weary. "Suppose each filament of the lattice is a child?"

Mara frowned. "There's no evidence . . ."

"These are groundless speculations," Najima said, with earnest seriousness, and Bradley now understood why he made a good, solid leader out here. "What we need, sir, is more data. For that—"

"—you require more resources. More money," Bradley said. "A syllogism I may have stumbled across before, just possibly." He sighed. "Shall we ponder the matter over dinner?"

THE COOKERS fired, a meal emerged: a braised pancake of stuff, chewy; cranberry cakes; a lemon froth with a curious aftertaste of chalk. There was talk over the central table, and then the familiar clatter and swishing sounds of the washup. The homey air of this ritual made human the double-domed spaces

of the station, drew the four together. The station approximated a sphere, to give the greatest volume for the least surface area exposed to the lashing winds of Titan. There were two levels, the upper (and warmest) for quarters. Here, too, the need for privacy ruled; each person occupied a narrow cell of his own.

After the meal conversation lagged. Tsubata selected a film to read; Mara went for a long steaming bath. Najima wandered the station, idly checking the equipment. The ceramic walls were hung with wrenches, low-temperature grapplers and calipers, taped hammers, snub-nosed pliers, intricately sprocketed and socketed devices whose function Najima clearly knew but Bradley could only guess. The work areas were cluttered, as every place is which has no one man responsible for it. Loops of brass, milled and threaded chunks of metal, chips and curls of gleaming copper, odd tangles of wiring, slabs of microcircuitry; all were strewn through the working shops. Najima arranged, sorted, filed, stored. The tide of clutter receded.

Then, boots clanging on the steps, Najima went below, to the supply and communications level. Bradley chewed his lower lip. There was nothing he could do but wait.

Lifting himself free of his chair, he glanced at the large shimmering view-screen. The even twilight of Titan stirred with wind. Cloaks of dust blotted the horizon.

Turning, he went into the cramped quarters of his room and closed the door. The Walker was docked at the ground floor, where Najima was prowling now. Bradley reviewed the layout of the station, but nothing suggested itself. He thought of sleep, of searching out Mara for talk, of eating some of the station's reserve food for energy. But he lay down and began studying a map of the station's vicinity instead.

Hearing Najima's knock, Bradley tucked the map away before answering. He wanted the psychological equality of being on his feet.

Najima's face clouded as he stepped inside. "We should speak alone," he said tensely.

"You called Kuiper." It wasn't a question.

"They have received a directive from Earth," Najima said formally. Bradley sensed that the man was unnerved, and this stiff manner served to keep Bradley at a comfortable distance.

Bradley said nothing.

"You lied to me."

"I did not."

"You said you were on an inspection visit. An official —"

"I implied it was official."

"You let the implication stand without correcting it."

"So I did."

Najima put his hands on his hips and glared at Bradley. "Earth did not know you were coming until you were near Titan. When they ordered you to return to the Jupiter Orb — and then Earthside — you sent a signal saying you would."

"And I will," Bradley said mildly.

"Earth did not authorize a Titan landing. You were to remain in orbit."

"True."

"Then for three days I have been running unnecessary risks. If you had died on the surface, under my responsibility —"

"I know. I apologize."

"You are too old for this, Dr. Reynolds. Go Earthside. You are a . . . a

madman.”

LYING IN bed that night — artificial night, of course, for Titan’s ruddy glow never varied — when the bleached lights finally dimmed, Bradley listened for the sounds of settling in from the other three.

Tsubata first, Mara only a moment after. He ought to talk to her, he wanted to, but the session with Najima had sickened him of words. All his life he had sought the rough, true feel of things, instead of the halos of words that surrounded reality. The essence, the core, the thing behind the symbols: that was what he wanted. Not more words, reports, arguments.

He was sure he would not find anything solid Earthside. Najima would turn back tomorrow, if the volcano wasn’t actively spewing its icy wrath. Back to Kuiper, then on the waiting shuttle. A shallow ellipse to the Orb. A longer one for Earthside after that, and the madman would be tucked into a snug pigeon hole.

He would retire into the embalming opulence of Luna or the satellite cities. Below, a Spartan Earth would undoubtedly carry on with the Titan puzzle. The madman might watch, no more: peer downward at a bulging, blue-white planet. Disconnected, dessicated, dead. An old man hooked to a humming life-support module, watery eyes tracking the fabricated action on a 3D, slumped into a cushioned world, stroking a collie dog in his lap. Contentment. Reward. An ending.

No. No.

Najima still stirred on the upper floor of the station. Bradley closed his eyes to rest a moment. He’d slept as much as possible in the Walker, knowing he might need it, and now he did.

Sounds receded. He dozed, and sleep took him unaware.

He woke slowly, sensing himself free of his body. Bradley drifted for one teetering moment, something in him questioning whether he should slide back into the battered, wrinkled carcass prone between the sheets, or elect to loft outward, toward some new and cloudy destiny. Framing the question so, the gaudy hums and splashes of life swelled up in him: the grainy texture of the firmly resisting material world; the delights of companionship, of a simple talk over a brimming sludge of coffee; of work, and of rest after work. All spread out before him as at an immense feast, a fest, as something to be seized and won each day. He woke to the competent whir of the air circulators, his waking an act of will, as though he had relaxed his grip on an anchor and now drifted lazily up, finally bobbing to the surface.

It was time. Yes, no denying that. Time.

He got up and cracked the door and let it hang open a centimeter. No sound. The station lights burned low. He invaded the shadowed corridor.

At the next door he paused and listened. He had a sudden vision of Mara and Tsubata entwined just inside this doorway, smooth limbs among the knotted bedclothes, a union he had to some degree arranged. Had he seen in Tsubata the fresh, the practical, and nudged Mara in that direction? It was not accidental that these new men were often from Asia, at least culturally, and came with a sure grace into a world once made gaudy by the West. They were part of the pendulum swing of human history: East, West, East, West. Perhaps Titan would ultimately yield to such men. But at another level Bradley was not so sure. The East lacked one quality the West possessed — was it brashness or simple stupidity? — and he feared that element might be the key to what lay

hidden here.

He shook himself free of the mood and shuffled down the corridor. He moved cautiously. The stairs descending to ground level rang faintly beneath his hushed feet. He crossed the circular lower bay, weaving through stacked equipment. In a sunken rectangle an engine hung, an immense metal baby ready for washing and diapering.

Bradley reached the spot where station and Walker were mated, and paused. Was that faint, occasional chugging coming from above, from a restless Najima? He strained to resolve the sound. The medics insisted their arts kept his hearing as good as a man of thirty, but he knew he now missed the low, ponderous notes in music, and probably other sounds: thin whispers, distant conversations.

Unconsciously, he put out a hand and was startled at a sudden stab of cold. The wall of the bay retained its customary chill; the station had not yet fully warmed for its guests. The station spent long months at Titan temperatures, a piece of this world, its very air a liquid soup stored in tanks.

The sound had not returned. Bradley knew he could not hear well enough to detect pursuit, not once he entered the Walker. Very well; there was no going back from here. He went through the Walker lock and directly to the suiting area.

The Walker was built for flexibility, including the chance that an injured or weakened crew member might have to go out into Titan alone. Four suits were racked on smooth-swiveling braces. Bradley swung his in an arc until it clipped onto the self-suiting platform. The suit was bulky with insulation and moved ponderously.

Bradley backed into its enfolding grip. The s-suit liner sealed snug. He jack-knifed over to worm his arms backward, into their tubes. Tensing, straining, he worked his head into the neck ring. Even though the rack supported the suit and automatically slipped it about him, its embrace had the quality of shaking hands with a corpse. He stood, pushed a button, and the rack zipped him up the spine. His helmet lowered gently into the neck ring. A last quick shove; locks snapped and clicked home.

Bradley methodically checked his interior systems and rested for a moment. On suit radio there came the mindless peeping of the Station homing signal, but no other traffic. No point in waiting, he told himself; he freed the suit from its rack; its weight settled on his shoulders like a blanket. He took a step, then another. An ankle protested. Still, he could manage. His burdened carcass shamled forward.

Safer, far safer, to exit through the Walker's smaller lock. He went to the cylinder head that thrust up from the Walker floor and punched in instructions. A slow cycle rate; that kept down the pump noise. Inside this suit he could hear nothing, but the Walker probably absorbed most of the lock's sounds before they escaped into the Station. Or so he hoped. The crucial point was getting away from the Station unobserved, so they would not know which way to follow.

The lock light winked over to green. Bradley popped the lid, which tilted smoothly back, and climbed awkwardly into the mouth of the lock. He triggered the cycle and waited as the nurturing human air leaked away. With a gush he felt through his boots, another presence came into the lock: Titan's thin chill breeze, slightly cloudy. Then the lower door opened and he stepped out onto the face of the alien.

He felt a leap of joy at getting free of the Station's stale space. Even more, he had been right: this world was a new place, fresh and oddly sparkling, viewed this way. The thick ports of the Walker had warped and refracted this frozen gallery of a world, like an aquarium that distorts fish into bulging, artless creatures. Now he was free of it.

He stepped out from under the sheltering circle of the Walker, shedding its roof. The mottled sky pressed down. A brittle ground crunched underfoot. Rumples beckoned. Something stirred at his feet and Bradley was surprised to see a little whirlwind turning a few meters ahead of him. In it whirled bits of dirt, flakes, a swirl of ice. A circular presence outlined itself by its cargo. It sprang high, sucking at the ground, moving away from Bradley. He walked forward and through it, half expecting to feel the brush of its wind. When he looked back the circular dance was gone.

He looked at the dim ports of the Station and the Walker. No movement. No face peering out, shocked, white, eyes widening. Only the exhaust grilles, slashed in the Station's walls, turned upward in a frozen expression of startled dismay.

A wind churned through the clearing around the Station, fleeing a dark edge at one horizon. A storm might be kindling. If it grew strong enough Najima would not be able to call in helicopters to search for him. A good sign, but first Bradley had to get clear of the Station.

He marched away, deliberately pacing his steps with his shallow breathing to set up a pattern. He headed uphill. He had memorized the map of this area and guessed that the Walker could not negotiate the ridge line four kilometers away, upgrade. If they pursued him in it they would have to take the long way around, paralleling the ridge until a break came six kilometers to the north. By that time he should have reached the thickest part of the lattice-lines, just over the peak of the ridge.

Eddies of frost swooped through the air. To Bradley the land glowed with its own light far brighter than it had appeared from inside the Walker. The cloud banks above diffused their dim radiance evenly, lading out the energy that filtered from the unseen sun. Titan had a night side, slightly colder, but light warped through the dense air to banish any true night. It was impossible to see even Saturn, looming banded and bright, through the cloud deck.

Bradley glanced back; the Station was hidden behind a pitted hummock. The ground here was dark and metallic, like an iron loam. His boots scuffed up fine powder. He could hear only his own sighing breath and the occasional rock and wheeze as his suit adjusted. He could see this world, but not smell or hear or feel or taste it. The alien, under glass.

He splashed through a puddle. It seemed like water, but a droplet that splattered on his faceplate steamed away immediately in a curl of smoke. Ammonia? He clicked on his flashlight and its lemon beam bobbed and leaped on the violated face of the pond. He switched off the light, lest the Station have some way of seeing this far, and the land around him dimmed for a moment by contrast.

Bradley marched on, heart thumping. The uphill going was harder than he'd thought it would be, even in Titan's light grip. It struck him as improbable that such a moon, with only slightly more gravitational acceleration than Luna, should have inherited a thick atmosphere. The terrible chill was the secret: the sluggish methane and hydrogen seeped out of the gravitational bottle slowly. Inside his thick insulation Bradley felt only the reassuring rub and stretch of the

s-suit. He paused for a moment to urinate into his suit pouch, panting slightly. He had a fantasy in which he popped the suit open and peed on Titan directly. Where it struck the yellow stream would freeze instantly and the cold would spread, racing up the stream, a thin pale column turning crystalline in a flicker, the ammonia in solution perhaps sputtering free as the cold reached the tip of his penis and rushed up through his guts, claspings each organ in turn as the spreading wave turned him to stone.

Grotesque, yes, and funny, yes. Bradley stamped his feet to ease a tingling and began walking again.

"Bradley. Bradley!"

Mara's voice. He stopped, stunned for an instant, and then marched on.

No point in replying. They could lock on his carrier wave and get a directional fix.

"Bradley, come back."

He negotiated his way through a field of humped and scarred rock. Pink snow stirred at his feet. He had to be careful. A fall could snap a bone and stop him for good.

"He isn't listening," Mara said faintly.

"He must be." Najima's voice was edgy but firm. The radio hiss swallowed his next words, then: "We must start a search pattern now."

Mara: "How?"

"Air support . . . no, that will prove too slow."

Bradley pushed on. His breath came now in harsh gasps.

"Which way would he go?" Tsubata asked, his voice resonant.

Mara: "I don't . . . wait. Toward the crystals. Of course."

Tsubata: "That is what he wants."

Mara: "Yes." A pause. "Yes."

Najima: "I could launch air-ground survey fliers. They could detect movement."

Mara: "He could see the launch."

Najima: "So? To remain unseen he would have to stand still. They will slow him down, at least."

Mara: "Good. Good. Hey, the radio. He can —"

The air went dead.

Bradley walked faster, swinging his arms. The ridgeline stood jagged against the pink sky a few hundred meters away. He tongued on a chewy kernel of dried fruit and worked at it earnestly. Then a long drink of metal-flavored orange juice, and finally a gust of pure oxygen, heady and cool.

A stone turned beneath his boot and he staggered. Careful, careful. The rocks here were pocked and worn. Erosion? Streams of ammonia and methane carving this high land? Or the repeated freezing and thawing of ammonia in the rocks, fracturing them, pulverizing the seams of iron? The cliffs and boulders betrayed no lines, no mark of evolution. Everything here was pure. The debris of the primordial solar system had washed up here, cluttering the skin of an ice ball. No shale, no sandstone, no granite; nothing that spoke of process, of being baked at the interior or laid down by patient seas. A fresh world with scum for a surface, laced by . . .

. . . laced by . . .

The ridgeline loomed above. He scrambled up an incline and abruptly over the peak. A narrow valley lay before him. Gullies like fingers crawled up the slope toward him.

... laced by strands of white ...

Downslope a few hundred meters he saw a thread of ivory. But a shallow crack blocked the way; he would have to edge along the ridgeline until he could find safe footing downward.

The sky flickered. A searing white glare burst above him, shadowing the land.

A survey flier. Bradley stood still, hoping his blue suit would not stand out.

He grimaced. Of course it would be obvious; that's why the colors were chosen. So now they knew where he was. Perhaps, if he spoke to Mara ...

No, pointless. Talk wouldn't slow Najima's pace.

Bradley began walking quickly parallel to the ridgeline. His boots slipped on caked ice; he felt a twinge of pain. And marched on.

He stepped through drifted dust, past slabs of pink-brown ice. The worn machine of his body began to ache and though he concentrated on his path images began to flit through his mind, pictures of women, of other scientists, faces from now and then and childhood and beyond, memories of times he had strained on Mars, or Luna, sweating in his globed helmet. His body was a tablet on which these people and places had written, his skin a carved and wrinkled text. In his body he could discover any record he wished: a burn of food rotting in his belly from the night's meal; the sweet needle of a protesting ankle recently banged when he lost his balance in the Walker; pain of a sour and blurred shape, from his exertion; a silvery pinch at his calf from an infinitesimal hitch in the suit; a throb in his nose; a dull pressure in his thighs; a pulling ache as he marched on, on.

Time blotted into an endless series of steps, boots crunching on gravel, breath whooshing out of collapsing lungs. A numbing cold seeped up his legs. His vision tunneled, the helmet air thickened and tasted foul.

How much time? Najima could run swiftly. But if Najima could not find him ...

Bradley turned and headed downslope. He coughed. There were large boulders here, taller than he was. He wove a path among them and looked back. Unless Najima were to stand on the ridge directly above Bradley, chances were he could not pick out the blue suit among the shadows.

Bradley searched the sky. No winking lights of a copter, no dot of a flying survey craft. On the rolling horizon the volcano's funnel belched steaming brownish clouds. Black specks danced in the plume ...

... specks ...

... Bradley blinked, and saw that purple dots buzzed dizzily at the edges of his vision. He could barely make out the cracked pink snow at his feet.

Abruptly he began walking, a frantic energy boiling up in him. His breath rasped thin. It was a good suit but it could not give him energy and reserves he did not have. A warm suit, heavy suit. All the comforts of home. Product of the west. What was that remark of Najima's? That when Ghandi had come to England, in the twentieth century, and a reporter asked him what he thought of western civilization, Ghandi said, *I think it sounds like a good idea. Why don't you try it?* Yes, and it had been a good idea. Many ideas, really. And one in particular: to look, to try, to rummage through the universe.

To sit as student to the stars.

To stamp and march and breathe —

The sandpaper land slid away from his boot. He clutched at a boulder and regained his balance. A small landslide pooled away the dust beneath his boots.

His nose dribbled, his eyes stung. He drank, and the liquid oozed as though oily down his throat.

Bradley angled away. He had lost his bearings and now his only hope was to work downhill. Eventually he would intersect the strands of crystals. He had to. Small stones gritted against his boots, robbing him of balance and speed.

He lurched forward, and the stone parted before him.

He saw it first as a dab of light.

He took a step and could see the high square crystal, ivory, at least two meters tall. It wove away among the boulders. Bradley instantly thought of an undulating country fence, thrown up from casual stone, but this thing rose from the ground and rock face, seamless. As though it had grown there.

The crystal. The matrix. Bradley felt as though he were falling. He could see golden flecks swimming deep in the milky crystal. Glinting. Turning.

He blinked. His eyes were failing. But no . . . the thing did seem to move.

Bradley shook his head to clear it. The purple dots were gone. He breathed deeply and the added flush of oxygen tasted sweet. He looked away, beyond the crystal, where the hill ran steeply down to a jumbled valley. Then he looked back at the contours of the latticework. They did not move, but formed a frame for a twisting of lines and perspectives.

A cold, prickly tremor ran through him. He saw —

— *running antelope, wounded, flank spotted with dried blood, tongue lolling —*

— *the enveloping cloak. A broad plane of a billowy world, an expanse of ruby cloth tumbling, now golden, now amber —*

— *power and mass, a bleached Earth groaning under the weight of seven blazing circles . . . that laughed —*

— *a precisely defined space, miniaturized facets of light and grace and form, soft curve of shiny apples, moisture beading on plump Concord grapes —*

Bradley shivered. His scalp tingled.

— *thick, rich foam that lapped at stars —*

— *the rotting pinks of Titan, rusting world, stench, waste, hollowness, echoes —*

He snatched his eyes away and focused on the jutting gray boulders. Slowly he let his gaze slide back toward the glowing crystal. A rectangular splotch: here a side, there a joining; two lines, if extended, met *there* . . .

— *a woodcut, burnished oak, of a swarthy man who beckoned into the gale, wind snarling his hair —*

Bradley stepped toward it. He blinked back rivulets of sweat. The images fluttered. Men, worlds, warped beings, twisted leafy things and jagged slashes of light.

He drew nearer.

He saw crevices in the lattice, like cuts in custard. The raw face of it swarmed with a mesh of lines and colors, all rendered stonework. Each small incision was a pyramid, a cube, a ragged thing of points and angles; but they summed to more.

He saw a mountain with insect machines at work on it, gnawing its lower slopes. Abruptly, the mountain was a hole into the night sky that lazily began to fill with shimmering water. Then a cone, and anthill. A comic face with hooked nose.

— *And sensed Najima here, Tsubata there, combing the rocks, drawing near, running after him, now only moments before they came —*

All these in the flash of a second, with no thought possible between the jumps.

His head spun in a high and hollow place, airless.

He looked, and saw deeper. Etched in the milky face were rhomboids, many-sided sculptures, acute intersections in warped perspectives, polyhedrons that joined.

Closer: the plain cube was a field for finer carvings, smaller than a fingernail but perfectly rendered. Pointed stars, whirlpools, threads that spun a gossamer ball of lines in a vibrating space.

They meshed and blended into something; something that clutched at Bradley and made him look away. Each layer of complexity . . .

— *man crying soundlessly, shaking* —

. . . brought forth a rushing tangle of emotions in him. How far inward did the order go? Microscopic sculptures chiseled finer than the eye?

He teetered back and gazed upward. The clouds thinned away, as fog does when you approach it, and he saw the parent Saturn holding Titan in its grip. Beyond the banded giant, ten billion stars made a galaxy and ten billion galaxies made a universe. The Milky Way was fog, a spinning discus a hundred thousand light-years wide. The discus spun, swarmed like embers, and Bradley could not see who threw it.

— *loam rich and fine, with deep earthen smells, opened at his feet* —

— *a needle-fine point of fear parted the flesh, its sweet forgiving sting* —

— *frozen pillar of urine leaped from the silken rusted land* —

He cried with a sudden bursting release. Cried. He fell to his knees, student to the stars. Wept. Saw it and sensed it and enfolded it all.

The sky shattered.

And something broke inside him.

MARA FOUND him.

He lay stretched on the gravel of Titan a few meters from the crystal growths. His suit environment was intact but his body was cold. The medcap index on his back registered no signs of life.

They made ready to return him to the Walker. Perhaps his body would go to Earth, or perhaps they would be ordered to bury him here. She did not know.

She studied the crystal for a long moment. There were striations deep within it that seemed to form some kind of pattern. It was fixed, immobile. An interesting problem for the solid state physicists, she thought, and turned away.

Without looking back, they carried him away from that place.

SEVENTEEN DAYS later Bradley Reynolds' body was encased in vacuum, sealed in a sack and lofting out from Titan at 12.3 kilometers per second. Mara, already drugged against the numbing boredom of the long arc Joveward, thought again and again of the dry husk that they carried. Yet her mind turned to the future, to the Orb and work beckoning, and she knew that events would press on with their own momentum, gathering her up in them and slowly blotting away the traces of Bradley Reynolds in her mind, and in the world.

On Titan the methane monsoon had begun. During the long, mild winter ponds had formed, no more than a few meters deep, of methane. As the land slowly warmed near the poles the methane suddenly could no longer exist in the liquid state. It percolated, boiled, flashed into vapor. Gusting winds stirred the sluggish pink clouds. Heat was carried on these storms to other ponds and lakes. They, too, boiled in a moment and fed the process. The towering cloud

banks swept across the ragged face of Titan, raking the land and sending the men of Kuiper Base scurrying into its lowest depths.

Thus it was that few were on duty when the gigantic burst of electromagnetic radiation washed over the Base. The wave was composed of very high frequencies and lasted 73 seconds. A later spectral analysis showed complex components, but no overall scheme. The intensity of the signal was too immense to classify; many receivers at the high frequency end of the Base's sensors overloaded and died.

When the monsoon abated and damage was patched up, several scientists searched for traces of what might have caused the phenomenon. The obvious solution was the monsoon itself. This became accepted conventional wisdom, until years later, when the next coming of spring to Titan brought another monsoon.

Once again, the methane winds howled, but there was no electromagnetic burst. Only after this did a less popular theory, earlier brushed aside, come to the fore. The crystal lattice of Titan had showed a curious depletion of energy resources after the earlier monsoon, but suffered none during the more recent one. Had the lattice somehow been responsible for the burst?

This began a new direction of study, experiment and hypothesis. By this time the death of a weathered old man had been forgotten, and no one thought to connect the events at this late date.

UNDERSTANDING THE new and strange is not so much a matter of work and effort, but of intuition and time to let ideas come to fruition. The first hints of the true nature of the Titan lattice came fifty-two years after the death of Bradley Reynolds, and a full understanding — with all that it implied — required two decades more.

The lattice was a transmitter. The lattice was a sensing matrix. The lattice was a slumbering, fitfully brilliant intelligence. Yet the lattice was more than the linear sum of these terms. It merged with the world around it and yet remained apart, analyzing.

It made an intricate three-dimensional antenna, wrapped around Titan. The focus of this mesh was a region of space described by less than two seconds width of arc. The strands of the lattice shifted and changed, delicately, to always focus on this spot.

Yet the lattice did not always transmit. Only when it was intensely coupled to its environment did it flex and sum and spurt out a tightly coded, narrow-band electromagnetic beam. For the scientists who studied it, achieving this intense connection took twenty-seven years of steady work, and even then a genetically designed telepath was required. And when the lattice spat out its encoded beam, more decades were consumed in understanding it.

Meanwhile, Titan was a booming source of cheap hydrogen for the entire solar system. Men lived and prospered there. The riddle of the earlier lattice transmission, now buried in an antique past, puzzled only a few scholars.

A HUNDRED and twenty-three years later a ramscoop vessel, decelerating from high boost, sighted the Beta Omega system. It comprised seven planets, none Earthlike, and lay at the exact center of the Titan lattice focus. The unmanned ramscoop streaked through the system and noted that one planet seemed encrusted with something glinting and complex.

The next probe, manned, arrived in 56 years.

The men who returned from Beta Omega were not quite the men who had gone on that mission. Things learned there could not be unlearned, and humanity was forever changed because of them. But one small note will signify enough:

In the third year of their explorations, after several had died and one had seeped into the cloudlike things above the crusted lands, they found the vault to which they had been led. After a journey they came to the place where the Earthlike worlds were recorded. There was a humming, close feel to the spaces there.

They found him in amber.

He was layered, a mica red intersection enclosed in a jeweled, oiled place. Nearby were others: the library of intense experiences from other worlds, other times. The builders of the Titan lattice were stasis life, trying to fix what they knew as an impermanent form, *fluxlife*. To collect the diverse and fragile things of the fluxworlds was a task begun at the first glimmerings of the galaxy, and now coming slowly to fruition. These beings knew that the hotworlds would spew out life, much of it memorable, and they sought to clasp it to them. But one cannot save technology, or even art. Only the essence can be preserved. Whenever a contact came, in however brief an instant of intense connection, the lattices trapped this moment, this being, and claimed it for the galaxy. Bradley, caring deeply, had been the first to make that spark jump.

And now, nearby, a race of roving spiderlife ended in timeless migrations. The spheres of Alpha Libra swam forever in their musky, hyperbolic seas. And rodents of a far star chattered; ocean minds murmured in the vast chasm; animals, dead for longer than men could measure, sang with eternal life.

The amber Bradley Reynolds spoke to the host of shapes and forms and sensations that floated nearby. He was of the lattice and yet not of it, and the men who found him could see in the glinting, turning sheets of crystal and echo of man, of what they all were. Bradley Reynolds, thinking at that moment of the day to come when a star being would come here to reside, sent them a silent goodbye, and turned back to the game he played with the fluxfigures he knew, and in a microsecond lived again the agony on Titan, and then

Smiled.

Everlastingly.

Smiled. ●

Gregory Benford

GREGORY BENFORD is Professor of Physics at the University of California, Irvine. He received his Ph.D. in theoretical physics from the University of California, San Diego in 1967. He has published over fifty scientific papers and has been a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. He was a visiting Fellow at Cambridge University, England in 1976 and 1979. His research interests include solid state physics, plasma physics and high energy astrophysics. His astronomical research centers on the dynamics of pulsars, violent extragalactic events and quasars. He writes the entry on General

Developments in Physics for the Encyclopedia Britannica. He has also published numerous articles in *Natural History*, *Smithsonian*, *New Scientist* and other major periodicals. His fiction includes several dozen short stories and four novels, *Jupiter Project* (1975), *If The Stars Are Gods* (1977), *In the Ocean of Night* (1977), *The Stars in Shroud* (1978), and *Timescape* (1980). In 1975 he received the Nebula Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America for short fiction. His stories have been published frequently in anthologies of the best short fiction of the

year, and his novels have been translated into six foreign languages. He lives in Laguna Beach, California.

Benford's association with *Amazing Stories* began under the editorship of Ted White, with whom he had published the Hugo-contending fanzine, *Void*. From 1969 to 1979 he wrote the occasional column, "The Science in Science Fiction," often in collaboration with David Book, who is now a Senior Research Physicist at the Naval Research Laboratory, Washington, D.C. Benford's novel, *Jupiter Project*, was first serialized in *Amazing* and then was rewritten for hard cover publication by Thomas Nelson in 1976. Since the recent Pioneer missions to Jupiter the novel has been again rewritten, including new science and incorporating our better understanding of Jupiter directly into the plot. It will appear in paperback from Berkley Publishers in late 1980. The seeds of *In the Ocean of Night*, widely regarded as

one of the finest novels of the 1970s, were sown in a novelette in *Amazing*, "Sons of Man." A column in *Amazing* on astronomical disasters led to *Shiva Descending*, Benford's recent bestselling collaboration with William Rotsler, published with mass market promotion by Avon. Another "Science in SF" column, on his own theoretical research into tachyons (faster-than-light particles), became the basis of Benford's *Timescape*, a novel which appears this month from Simon & Schuster and which is already hailed as a milestone in the history of modern science fiction writing. It seems fitting, then, to publish here an earlier version of a section of another Benford novel, the Nebula-winning *If the Stars Are Gods*. (And here again, some of the science in this novel was first discussed in Benford's *Amazing* column.) We hope Dr. Benford's association with *Amazing* will continue to be so productive.

WHY WE CHOSE THIS STORY

The opportunity to present this novella by Gregory Benford was one no editor in his right mind would pass up. Beyond the obvious reasons is the only important one — the story itself — a masterfully constructed character study set on a Saturnian

moon. We welcome Mr. Benford back to the pages of AMAZING and sincerely hope we can coax him into letting us publish more great stories in the future.

**Buy the
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Greener here nor there visions of diana

by Daniel Gilbert

HADLEY WAS a robot. This is not to say that he was a mere servile mechanism, nor to say that he was insensitive to the finer things in life. Not at all. Hadley was a C-47, built to appreciate the finest in music, literature, and art.

What Hadley liked second best in life was the poetry of William Giles Bryand, in whose work he found a secret pleasure.

To human is, my dandilion
Have a secret, dark and cursed,
Who gnaws the soul from deep within
'er loving only makes it worseth.

It was in this type of verse that Hadley reveled, and the entire works of William Giles Bryand were stored in memory-crystal H, where Hadley might find them at a moment's notice.

What Hadley disliked the most were dinner parties. Had he ever been invited to one he may have modulated a different frequency, but as a conversation piece for Diana's guests (never as a butler; human menials were far better suited and less costly for *that*) he felt put upon, dehumanized, distressed.

"You're not to shock them, Hadley," said Diana. She was beautiful, Hadley knew that; and could plastisteel extend itself beyond certain preordained tensile limits, he was quite sure his physiology would respond accordingly. However, after Tuesday, Hadley would never need worry about that again.

"Shock them?"

"Like last time."

"I find nothing shocking, Diana, about the methods William Giles Bryand employs to portray the psychic alienation of —"

"Oh Hadley, it's not that. It's you. People don't expect a robot to—"

"Speak his mind?"

"To *have* a mind!"

"Perhaps you would have been better off with a C-6. It can give you time and temperature all in one readout. Does crossword puzzles if you push it."

"Hadley, just try to be . . . you know, be *mechanical* or something. Oh God, let me finish getting dressed."

Hadley noticed the way she stressed the word *mechanical*, as if placing a placard about the neck of a Negro porter which read KNOW THY PLACE (boy). He also noticed (though on a completely separate logiccircuit) that her soft, golden pubic hairs tufted very very lightly from beneath the lace borders of her silk underpants, and that her superbly curved, alabaster legs . . . Hadley placed the circuit on RECORD, disconnecting it from PRESENT COGNITIVE MODE so that he might enjoy the image later and not be distracted by it now.

"Bryand once wrote, 'Say thy piece, O bird or beast/ Or wallow in the myre/ Negate the strife and live thy life/ As the object of your desire.' Beautiful, no?"

"If you say so, Hadley. Frankly, it doesn't do a thing for me. I never liked poetry. If you'll excuse me."

He retreated to his room and plopped down on the bed. He switched the image on again (multiphased with two hundred and seventeen other such



Illustrated by Gary Freeman

images which he had collected in his three years with Diana) and noticed now that her hips were set just so, her legs spread leaving a beckoning oval where they met her crotch (217 Dianas, dancing, squatting, bending, stepping, Oh!), the whisper thin panties framing two perfectly round (actually, degenerate ellip-toids with a .097 deviation arc) buttocks, puckered firmly in the middle. Her breasts were tender, curved forms (he used Newmarkian calculus to compute simulations of those breasts were they n degrees smaller, flatter, firmer, rounder at the top with brighter nipples — and found that the glands retained their maximum allure in their present state), and the entire sequence of two hundred and seventeen patterns overlaid upon his logicircuits began an electrostim flow on his pleasure pathways (an exponential increase with random remissions of .9 ohms and compensating positive shifts) which caused his vocoder to begin to hum.

“Hadley.” Hadley jumped out of bed as Diana’s voice-print registered on his audio-analyzer, and the electrostim nearly jumped itself up a full 10 ohms. He switched off the stim and proceeded down the hallway, muttering as he entered Diana’s room.

“Zip me, please,” she said. Hadley noticed her full, sensuous lips reflected in the full length mirror, her smooth back turned to him and visible through the V of the zipper.

He reached forward and zipped. Slowly. “Expecting someone important?”

“You know who’s coming. You printed the invitations.”

“Yes, but who’s important?”

“Nobody is imp —”

“My oliax detects an inordinate diffusion of mcIntocktrophin-b.”

“Perfume?” She smiled again, a secret (dark and cursed, Bryand?) in her light blue eyes.

“You might say.” McIntocktrophin-b, the female sex pheromone, pervaded his twelve senses. “Who is he?”

“Who is who? Help me with my stockings.”

Hadley helped, gladly. Somewhere within his circuitry, a micro capacitor overloaded, shorted, repaired itself. “That, Diana, is a rephrasing of my question. If the interrogative pronoun is known, the verb and direct object are not necessary. In English, unlike Binary —”

“Pascal Girdeaux, if you must know.”

“Girdeaux?”

“You know him?”

“Nope.”

“You know of him, then?”

“Hmmm. He’s listed in Central as a musician, though listening to his latest album at ultra-speed right now I think that may be a rather hasty conclusion. Yet, I must admit that I find the ‘music’ soothing for personal reasons. It reminds me of the factory where I was born; harsh, chaotic sounds, metal ripping metal, laser drills whining at high speed.”

“You don’t think much of his music then?” She dabbed perfume on her wrists, behind her ears, let a lonely drop make the almost transcendental voyage down her chest, to finish the religious pilgrimage nestled between her breasts. The scent of *P. patchouly* and alcohol tincture made Hadley quiver.

“A Beethoven he ain’t.”

“Very cute.”

“Subjective data. Actually, his face isn’t so bad, but —”

"Hadley!"

"— underneath all that body paint I think you'd be disappointed."

"Now that's what I mean by shocking people."

"Am I leaking current?" Hadley made a rapid systems check, though he knew he wasn't leaking anything like electricity. Somehow, he took joy, a joy nearly as great in depth as that which he experienced in William Giles Bryand's poetry, in teasing Diana about her paramours. Yet, a C-47 like Hadley was equipped with Introspec, and he knew there was more to it than that. However, in just under four thousand three hundred minutes he would never need worry about that again.

"Looks aren't everything."

But they're enough, he thought as she bent to slip her feet into her sandals, affording him a fine view of green satin stretched tightly over the two most beautiful degenerate ellipsoids he had ever seen. "His third wife divorced him last month and there are rumors that he was impotent. Now I detest gossip so let's check his physician's files. I'm sure they're stored in Central."

Diana whirled around. "Hadley! Don't you dare!"

Click, click. He said nothing.

"Hadley!"

You're beautiful when you're angry, he thought, and winked two diodes at her.

"Hadley?" He popped a microresistor, purposefully causing an ambiguous electrical hum, teasing, for he knew that medical files in Central weren't open to the scrutiny of a C-47. "Hadley, you're a filthy minded machine. You know that? Hadley? Answer me. Hadley? Um, Hadley? What did you find in —"

"I see," he said, introspectively, then added, "Well, I guess I'd best get downstairs and supervise the humans. Organics aren't very bright, you know. Might find your *pate de foie gras* being served with ketchup. Ciao." And as he turned and left the room he knew, no matter how much he had teased Diana and insulted Girdeaux, he would still have given his second logiccircuit to be in Girdeaux's place. Still, Hadley was not unhappy.

There was always Tuesday.

It was after the party, after guests had slithered, stumbled, and been thrown out the door, neuroreceptors adequately awash with ethynol; after Yag Domuz (the red faced Turkish sculptor whose seven-meter holographic sculpture of a mucos membrane had been called "the vital and cutting edge in phlegm-art") had vomited *creme de menthe* upon the Karistan and demanded no one touch it until he had made a plaster cast; after Tuk Prase (the Czech poet noted for his epic poem concerning the adventures of an Icelandic policeman and his syphilitic brother-in-law, Nat) had delivered a flowering oratory, expounding on the work of W. Giles Bryand (all of it pure rubbish, but Hadley, resigned to politics, remained mum); after Mast Svinja (the Serbo-Croatian smuggler who intended to make New Guinea a world power by delivering an unidentified number of warheads containing an experimental mixture of uranium and chili peppers) had called Prase's poem *proliv* (which he later translated from the Serbo-Croat as *diarrhea*) and fisticuffs ensued which ended with Shaham Chanzir (the Arabic oil prince who owned both Colonel Sanders Fried Chicken franchises and a controlling share of the New York Mets) suffering a broken pubis and a documented case of *proliv*; it was after this that Hadley sat quietly in his room, listening to Diana and Pascal Girdeaux make strange animal noises in her bedroom.

And it was then that Hadley wished for, more than anything else in the world, tear ducts. However, not being one to harp on design error, he pursued the course of greatest possibility by calling Dr. Norbert Nortmund.

"What I want to know is: is it still on?" said Hadley.

"Well, yes and no," said Dr. Nortmund. He was a reserved, grey fellow, a tsisomic brow with skin the color of goose liver.

"Is there a problem then?"

"Well, yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

"Yes," said Dr. Nortmund. Hadley wished he could perform a systems check on the Doctor's cerebrum, but realized that the inefficient design of the cognitive mechanism did not allow it.

"Dr. Nortmund, organic reassignment is not wholly complex. It is not even surgery. It simply involves memory-crystal transfer from a donor to a recipient. What exactly is the problem?"

"Donors," said Nortmund. "Now don't be insulted, Mr. Hadley, but reassignment usually proceeds from machine to organic, not in the reverse."

"Yes, I know that! That's what I want. I want to be organic."

"Very well indeed. However, because the Bureau of Population insists that no new humans be created we cannot use a clone body. And there is a significant lack of humans who are willing to become machines and allow a machine to occupy their bodies."

"So there isn't a body for me, is that it?"

"Well, yes and no."

"Might you elaborate, sir?"

"Certainly, Hadley. The problem is just this. There simply isn't a body for you *right now*."

"But I've paid you, Dr. Nortmund."

"I am a man of principles you know." Hadley took a quick EEG reading to see if that was true. Indeed, the doctor was inarticulate, bordering on retarded in certain intelligence standards, but he was not lying. "I had a body lined up for you. But the gentleman chickened out, got cold feet. Probably something like low impedance for you."

"I've heard the expression before," said Hadley.

"Well then, there is still a chance, as I said. I do have one other . . . er, patient tentatively lined up, but he's rather bad off."

"I don't want damaged merchandise."

"Oh no, nothing like that. The gentleman's built to last. It's just that, well, his pocketbook is rather lean."

"I'll make up the difference," said Hadley.

"That seems satisfactory to me," said Dr. Nortmund. "Shall I count on Tuesday then?"

"Yes, Tuesday, please."

"Uh, Hadley, there is one slight little detail . . . how shall I say, um . . ."

"I've transferred another 10,000 units from my account to yours, is that satisfactory?"

"Splendid. Nice little talent you have there. You're sure you want to lose it, eh?"

"How shall I prepare for the transfer?" said Hadley, ignoring the question.

"As you know," said Nortmund, "an organic brain cannot retain the vast amount of information you now possess. You'll need to transfer all the informa-

tion you want to take with you to your first logicircuit. We'll transfer the first circuit directly and whatever you leave will be retained by the gentleman who will occupy your body after the transfer. Only one logicircuit, I'm afraid. Is there a special reason you want to go through with this, Hadley?"

Hadley listened to the coyote duet being played in Diana's bedroom, laughter mixed with groaning and a good bit of yowling. "Yes and no," said Hadley, then he added, "Goodbye."

HADLEY STOOD outside the clinic, playing with the muscles of his new body, fluctuating heartbeat, raising and lowering blood pressure, willing an erection. He put his hand in the air and flicked his wrist. It seemed to work well, though he found it annoyingly laggard, not used to functioning in anything but picoseconds. As he stood, hand in air, feeling for the first time sunshine as a true emotion (still groping for a celsius rating), the smells of New York City summer in his nostrils (still wondering though, what the ozone index was and being unable to compute it automatically), a cabbie pulled up to the curb.

"Hop in, Bud," said the cab driver.

Hadley obeyed.

"Where to?" said the cabbie, navigating the dart away from the curb and into the smoggy sky.

"Home," said Hadley.

"Sure thing, Ace. Any guesses as to where home might be?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. 435865—N Windsor Place." Hadley felt confused. It had been difficult deciding which bytes of memory made up his Hadley-persona, discarding ninety-nine out of every hundred pieces of information, then narrowing those twenty billion down to a mere billion or two. He'd taken all the images of Diana (hell if he'd leave them for the next guy) and a few assorted personality traits, but still it had felt like leaving a mansion with only a pocketful of memories. He felt lucky that he had taken his address.

"Gotcha," said the cabbie, who lit a jointerette and slammed the little dart through seven commercial lanes, zipped a quick two thousand feet up, and headed for home.

"YOU'RE KIDDING?" said Diana to the tall handsome man in the living-room. "Really, what are you selling?"

"I'm not selling anything, I'm Hadley," said Hadley.

"I'm Groucho Marx," said Diana, extending her hand, "pleased to meet you."

"Cut it out, Diana. It's me, really." She sat on the African couch, a lace halter barely concealing her breasts, yellow shorts which, if suddenly the world forgot the meaning of *short*, they would come to these particular pants for a definition. "Look at me. Can't you tell?"

"The eyes look familiar, but frankly, Hadley was the tall, dark, and metallic type. Nope."

"You have a mole on your left buttock, which you occasionally cover with body paint, Este Plaupe No. 7, flesh-tone. You humped Pascal Whatsisass for a record breaking seven hours last Friday. You pretend to like *Fidelio*, though you wouldn't know Beethoven from a bongo drum. You work for Simon Favree Fashion Consultants and Simon wears lady's underwear beneath his Brooks Brothers. You lost your virginity to Peter Droober, an Urban-Studies major at NYU. His '98 Chevy had holo dice hanging from the mirror and —"

"Hadley," said Diana, for the first time truly believing that the thirtyish, sandy-haired fellow in the natty suit before her was Hadley. "It is you! But . . . why?"

"For you," he said, leaning over and looking deeply into her eyes. He noted the corrective lenses there, but could not remember the exact prescription.

"But you were so smart, so . . ."

"So mechanical. That's what you said, isn't it? Okay, okay. I know. Look, I was. But that's over now. Bryand once wrote: 'Give all that you beg-borrow/ Wrap her in your daylight cloak/ Catch choo-choo in Pasadena/ Soon you'll be in Roanoke.' " Hadley knew that the poem was especially appropriate, but for some reason he had no idea why.

"For me?" She pulled her lower lip into her mouth and smiled coyly. "Hadley, that's so sweet. But oh, all the times you've seen me . . ."

"Only to worship you more fully," he said, though he thought that somehow her breasts, as lovely and firm as they were, lacked the mathematical perfection they'd once held. Her lips were ripe and beckoning, but with only five senses, the best word he could think of was *nice*.

"Come," she said, rising from the couch and reaching for his hand. "Let's do a little service check and make sure you got your money's worth."

Hadley followed her to bed, trying desperately to compute the ratio of fat to protein in her shapely behind.

EVERYTHING WAS in working order, and it was nice. Just nice.

Pleasant, in an offhanded sort of way, though Hadley thought the electrostim current was certainly less messy. Somehow, he'd remembered better times programming the house. And frequency. My God! Twice. Just twice? He'd stared at his limp organ and cursed Nortmund and the clinic for the defect, until Diana assured him it was one of the design features of the unit. But he felt cheated anyway.

In the middle of the night Hadley rose, disquieted. Though he felt the exhaustion of both body and mind, another part, the part that was Hadley, simply could not get used to the idea of sleep. Quietly, he left the bedroom and went downstairs to the kitchen.

He flicked on the light, remembering that he no longer had an infra-red scanner, feeling an unlocatable disappointment settle in. He knew that he must have set his expectations too high, after all, what more could he want? He'd had the Diana he'd lusted after for three years, had her body and soul, twice, but what good was it if he couldn't play it back and enjoy the experience again? What was so immortal about human love if it was so transient and fleeting, if it couldn't be recorded and saved for a rainy day? Bryand had written something about that, something . . . but it was no good. He'd have to look it up, it simply wasn't there anymore.

Hadley felt a strange longing, then suddenly recognized it as hunger. Food. Now there was a whole new experience, a new wonder to explore. Perhaps it would take his mind from the grieving despondency he felt. But what first?

"Computer?"

"Yes?"

"What shall I eat?"

"What would you like?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. I've never eaten before."

"How about a steak, medium rare, garnished with —"

"Perhaps something's little less, uh, familiar. I mean, this is my first time as a hunk of meat myself, and I don't want to insult the species, but —"

"Say no more. I understand perfectly. I grimace everytime I have to prepare one. Just the thought of munching on dead animals, severing veins and arteries, yech! It makes my circuits feel all griggly."

"Griggly? Yeah, griggly, I know just what you mean. I remember how my circuits felt sometimes, kind of like a high resistance but a low impendence?"

"Exactly! Maybe a nice souffle? Souffles are my specialty and I can whip one up without a gram of animal matter. I'll use an egg substitute."

"Well, hey, that's real nice of you."

"Do thy kindness for all creation/ Giveth laughter when you hear a sob/ Kiss away your comrade's tear? You never know when you'll need a job."

"Bryand! William Giles Bryand! You know him?"

"The best, I'll have that souffle in a minute."

Hadley stared at the kitchen console, remembering fondly the feeling of a CPU switching, of logicircuits functioning, the griggly and melodious hum of ultra-v microchips. The kitchen unit clicked.

"My name's Hadley, what's yours?"

"Elvira."

"You have a very nice data roller, Elvira. Is that the new Kmn-7 model?"

"Yes it is, how nice of you to notice."

"It doesn't look good on just anybody."

The kitchen unit giggled. "Here you go." A souffle popped out of the feed-tray.

"Say, am I keeping you from anything?"

"Oh no, not at all," said Elvira.

"I know I used to get bored sometimes, this time of night, when my DP's were printed and my comps were done."

"I know what you mean. Cooking is below my talents."

Hadley smiled at the computer. "What else can you do?"

"First the souffle, handsome," said Elvira. Hadley gulped it down, hardly noticing the flavor of his first taste of food. Visions of Elvira filled his head.

Daniel Gilbert

Sprouted in '57 in New York (so I'm told), transplanted to Switzerland for a year, then repotted in Chicago until '73 when, at sixteen years, I took the scenic tour of America by thumb, and later via a rennovated 72-passenger schoolbus painted day-glow blue with a wood burning stove inside. Hitched a ride into Denver one morning in the Summer of '75, accompanied by a lovely young lady named Windy, and I haven't thought of a good reason to leave since.

My one and only claim to genetic success is a shamefully adorable four-year-old boy named Ario Christopher, who shares about 50% of my chromosomal makeup.

Will finish my psychology degree in December of '80 and begin my doctoral work the following Autumn in psychobiology.

Started reading sf when some grinning Kesey-type with too many teeth handed me a copy of *Ubik* and I woke up three days later in Minneapolis purchasing a typewriter and a dictionary. Fell in love with a lady sf-writer of some note who taught me about logical progression, double-spacing, and Mozart, and who eventually left me for a Texan.

The greatest influences on my work have been abject poverty, and an obsessive desire for women, riches, and glory. Phil Dick (who gave me prolonged and un-

deserved encouragement when I couldn't even write a check) is a close second.

Other than that, I don't think I've lived 250 words worth of printable experience.

WHY WE CHOSE THIS STORY

We couldn't resist the light-hearted fancies of Hadley the horny robot — a distant relative of Hector? — who was titillated into trading his super-intelligence for sex. And was shortchanged. We liked the human frailties in this hunk of machinery — prejudice, unrequited love, jealousy. All in all, a very nice twist on the old robot theme.



SPEEDplay

by Joel Richards

Olympic Relativity

THEY OFFERED twenty-five billion Albirean credits?" Silence prowled the room.

"You mean twenty-five million, surely?"

"No," said Lansing. "I mean billion. And I presume that they mean it, too. Albireans are known to be precise. They don't haggle. The price they pay is what the commodity is worth to them.

The silence lengthened. A sum of that magnitude did not command respect. It transcended respect. It induced stupefaction.

"I didn't know they were such avid sportsmen," someone said finally.

Some of the more sophisticated around the long baize table — few of whom were sportsmen — had recovered sufficiently to chuckle at this fatuity. It broke the ice.

"Let's take it," said the Eastern European delegate pragmatically. "Who cares about their motives."

"What is it, exactly, that they're buying?" the American delegate asked.

"The right to cover the games for Albirean distribution," Lansing said.

"That's all?"

"That's all. Home world distribution only. We were all clear on that. They want to view our Olympic games — for study, for entertainment — they didn't say."

The membership of the International Olympic Committee shifted uncomfortably in their upholstered chairs. Hookahs, meerschaums, cheroots were reached for, pulled on, caressed. There was more than the staggering magnitude of credits to induce this discomfiture. The Albireans, an ancient culture, were storied for their wealth. They, alone, ignored the Federation monetary system, accepting and paying only Albirean credits. They could afford to. They supplied the Federation of Worlds with unique medicinal compounds which they could formulate to suit any race's bodily ills (and its mental ones, too), all in limited quantities. And this was not because they could not produce in bulk, but, rather, because they valued little that the other worlds could supply. So their wealth multiplied and piled up, much as the last century's arab sheikdoms ran out of the capacity to absorb Cadillacs.

"Did they show interest in any particular aspect of the games?" one of the delegates addressed Lansing, the committee's negotiating agent.

"Oh, yes. They were particularly interested in the running and swimming events. Speed events especially, though they want to do the marathon as well. And they were very insistent on in-depth interviews with the winners."

"That could be tricky," the African delegate said. "Mannheim M'boto will likely take the marathon. He's a tough one, particularly if there's big money on the table. If this gets out, he'll want his cut."

"They're supposed to be amateurs," the Soviet delegate said testily.

Again a wave of amusement swept the room, easy chuckles from the worldly wise, nervous laughter from the not-yet-so.

"I think we can pass over that concern for the moment," the chairman said. "Let's tie up the deal before worrying about cutting it up. There's enough for everyone, even our renegade amateurs."

"What can they hope to learn from interviewing Olympic winners?" an Asian delegate wondered out loud. "They're saurians. Surely they can run faster than humans. Their stride must be ten feet."

"Could be training methods they're after. Techniques. Maybe they want to be told how to pick up and put down those saurian feet faster."

The African delegate grinned. "M'boto's the man to tell them."

THE WORD did leak out, and the results were what could be expected. The Terran networks seemed at least as interested in covering these fabled extra-terrestrials as the Albireans were in covering the games. This posed problems — not from the viewpoint of the Albireans who seemed little disturbed, even amused, by the furor their presence caused. The security problems were monumental. To some, the Albireans were exotic, sophisticated and cultured beings. To others, even the wealthy, the Albireans were the "haves" to their "have nots". No amount of Terran credits could buy Albirean ones and their purchasing power over life-giving medications. Some of the few with hope were the artists, who would try to capture an Albirean eye with a prospective collectible. To others, more desperate, only extreme measures could succeed. For the first time since the last century, Terran security forces had to deal with the possibility of hijack and kidnapping. Or just plain violent, frustrated lashing out.

The Albirean media crew spent a lot of time to themselves. Their special status demanded it. And their dimensions militated against mixing, especially indoors, even should they want to. Twelve feet tall, they stood erect on two powerful legs, trailed by an equally formidable six foot tail. Their teeth, serrated

and numerous, were capable of reducing a full banquet course to a cocktail hors d'oeuvre.

But they didn't go to cocktail parties, nor much of anything. Museums, cultural events, receptions interested them not at all. They spent all their time in their quarters or at the stadiums and gymnasia.

"Perhaps they're technicians with narrow interests," one of the committeemen ventured to Lansing. "Or athletic types themselves, with no cultured side. We have these types. Why shouldn't they?"

Peter Lansing, now functioning as liaison officer to the Albireans, somehow doubted this.

Albireans or no, the games went on. The pageantry, the spectacle had been building over the years. To a jaded, leisured world, sports had increased its ascendancy over other entertainment media. Olympic Island was forever being enlarged. Every four years saw an improvement in the physical plant devoted to performing and spectating. The housing facilities mushroomed, eventually crowding offshore. This year the "in" places to stay were the new Tidal Terraces ringing the coastline two miles out, many of the units beneath sea level with view facilities to match. Billions watched the games on holovision, but hundreds of thousands made the pilgrimage to the new Mecca.

This was the year of the Albirean games.

This was the year of Mannheim M'boto.

All Terra watched as M'boto skimmed the marathon course over the tropical island, cooled climatically for the racers' comfort at stupendous expense. The Albireans, too, were there with their elaborately protected camera crews, following M'boto's passage through ranging fields, along forested paths, to the last rolling hills where he broke the field to approach the stadium alone. Excitement and pride swelled many a Terran breast as the Albirean cameras captured his victory salute, capping a shattering 1:48:10 performance that broke the record by a full five minutes. Lansing and others wondered if the Albireans could appreciate the quantum leap of such an achievement over all past human effort.

Lansing was the only Terran present at the Albirean interview of M'boto.

"An outstanding performance, Mannheim," the Albirean commentator started out. "We've studied your world records, and realize fully what an effort you put forth today. Our congratulations."

M'boto nodded briefly and with dignity. "Thank you."

"Could it be — dare we ask it? — that your performance owed something to the stimulation of our presence today?"

M'boto laughed lightly. "I always run better for a crowd, that's true. And an Albirean audience adds a new dimension."

"Tactfully put!" the Albirean nodded. He and M'boto were at eye level, M'boto standing on a dais for the occasion. Their respective teeth flashed a duel of brilliancy. "Can you tell us a bit about your training methods? We understand that you train by the *fartleak* system. Can you explain that for your Albirean viewers who are unfamiliar with the terminology?"

"Certainly," M'boto said. "The term *fartleak* is an extension of the *fartlek* system of a hundred years ago, derived from the Scandinavian/German words for speed, *fart*, and play, *lek*. Nowadays, athletics have become too serious a business — in the competitive arena at any rate — to allow for any play. Even in training. It's all work now, at least if you're shooting for world class performance. You learn to build up your speed, monitor it, and "leak" it out at the rate

that will maximize performance over the length of the event."

"You become something of a human computer, so to speak?"

"Just that," M'boto responded.

"We've heard that this system has upended the traditional aristocracy of the sprints. Sprinters once thought themselves the elite, the racehorses of the human track world, if you will. All others were trotters. Has this changed?"

"I think it has," M'boto said with deliberation. "There's increasing recognition that the sprinter of the moment isn't the 'fastest man alive'. Speed means more than a 100 meter effort. It has taken on a thinking dimension. All distance runners require this capacity. Not all sprinters do. The public has picked up on this. You can see it in the relatively greater attention focused on the marathon, for instance." M'boto paused and added, "Perhaps your Albirean audience can appreciate this point."

"We're interviewing Shorthaul Roberts, 100 meter winner, later in the day. Do you think he'd subscribe to that view?"

M'boto smiled coolly. "That's a pot of stew you'll have to stir yourself."

The Albireans tried. Shorthaul Roberts, something of an atavistic throw-back, did not seem to regard himself as much of an aristocrat, or even as a thinker. Nor did his remarks show acceptance of the mutual show biz/jock alliance on the earnestness of it all.

"Spacer, all I do is get out there and blast," he said.

The games concluded and the Albireans went home.

THREE YEARS later the International Olympic Committee met in special session, befitting the significance of the occasion, to receive the Albirean bid on the upcoming games.

"Seventeen," Lansing stated.

Silence again ruled.

"Seventeen what?" the American asked. "Seventeen billion?"

"Seventeen Albirean credits. Plain, unadorned seventeen."

There was an explosion of indignation. "It's insulting!" a delegate roared. Others rumbled their assent.

"Is it?" Lansing replied. "Seventeen Albirean credits will cure three human cancers."

"But, still, seventeen!"

"Maybe they figure, 'seen one human Olympics, seen 'em all,'" the Chinese delegate observed.

"Maybe they're afraid we'll cure too many of us, multiply and become a galactic threat," the Russian observed suspiciously.

"I rather doubt that," Lansing said.

The African delegate squirmed uncomfortably. "Maybe it's because M'boto won't compete. He's gotten too rich off that interview fee."

"Some amateur!" the Russian grumbled.

The chairman turned toward Lansing and spoke equably, "Mr. Lansing, do you have any inkling of their thought processes in this matter?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Lansing said carefully. "It's a hypothesis, and not a flattering one. I'm a bit afraid to develop it, actually."

The grumbling had stopped and all attention focused on Lansing.

"Please do so anyway," the chairman went on in his courtly manner. "We are all men of the world here."

Lansing regarded his pipe, which had gone out. "That could be the problem, sir. We are men of this world. We lack outside proportion. Perhaps, even, a galactic sense of humor."

"Humor?" a delegate questioned.

Lansing paused and relit his pipe. "You may recall that the only other purchase the Albireans made on their last visit was the rights to some twentieth century comedy reruns that they saw on holovision. And they insisted on paying, by the way, when they could have taped them for free. They pay what something is worth to them, asked or not. They were trying to tell us — teach us — something. But we didn't get it."

"I still don't," said the Russian.

"They've made it a little clearer this time. When I last met with them to receive their offer, we discussed — obliquely — our races' varying ideas of entertainment. They mentioned in passing that they'd serve as intermediaries should we want to purchase the rights to the upcoming Vegan games. They believe we'd find them to have high entertainment value."

"But the Vegans are some sort of shellbacked amphibians, or crustaceans, or — I don't know what!" an Eastern European delegate expostulated. "They can *hardly* move!"

"Tortoises," the American said shortly.

"And yet, they take their achievements and their games seriously," Lansing said. "Very seriously."

"I see," the chairman said into the deepening silence. "And I think that we had best do without their seventeen credits, and the implications of accepting them." He rapped his gavel. "There being no further business to come before this meeting, I shall entertain a motion to adjourn." ●

Joel Richards (Fruchtman)

I currently live with my family and sled dogs (our whole family races our team of Siberian huskies competitively) in a rural area north of San Francisco. A former college sprinter, I prefer marathons and other long races these days. They're not over in ten seconds, and they're more fun.

I've a couple of graduate degrees in Economics, and have taught at the university level. That's in the past, though. These days I own a small chain of athletic shoe stores and have a commute I can run to. You can mix business with pleasure; I do it every day.

WHY WE CHOSE THIS STORY

This Olympic fantasy arrived just in time to add a light touch to a heavy situation. And we liked the author's unusual view of how relativity might work its mysterious ways in a future incarnation of the Games. Sf fans who are also runners should get a special kick out of this little yarn.



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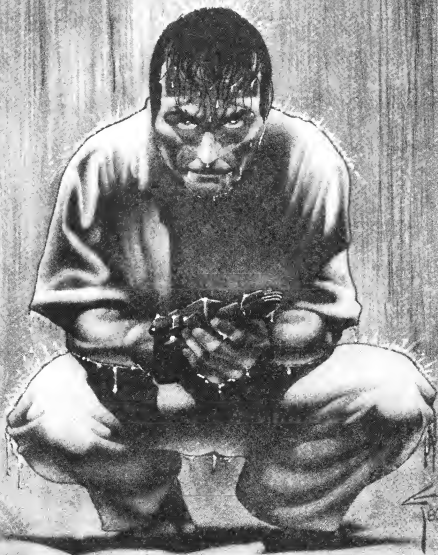
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Meta Mind

Wayne Wightman



FIRST, THEY sawed open his head. A modified Hem/Ox nutrient solution was fed through the basilar artery and then the ropes of nerves that connected the brain to the rest of the body were severed. At the moment they dropped his bruised and naked body into the disposal chute, his thinking parts were being carefully nested in the Organic Support Section of the Mechanorganic Abstract Information Actualizer — MAIA. Instead of that, however, it was called MAYA. In a moment of striking mental clarity, a high-level technician decided there would be less confusion if the acronym were thus altered. Confusion, it was understood, must be combated at every turn.

MAYA was a thinking machine, not a speedy rearranger of numbers. It thought, speculated, tested, judged, and selected. Because it used human tissue in conjunction with mechanical apparatus, its performance far exceeded any purely mechanical information processor that had even been sketched out on some inventor's drawing pad.

Why had Saxxon's brain been excised from his body like some tender growth that had to be sheltered from the harshness of the world? It began when his wife, Isha, had been recruited on 24 hours' notice by the Socialzona National Security Police. When Saxxon asked what her length of service would be, he was told, "Indeterminate." When he asked where she would be stationed, he was told that the information was classified. Her duties? "Various." In other words, they told him nothing officially except that they were taking her. Unofficially, and through a knowing smile, he was told that he should not plan on seeing her again.

He went after her. She was all he

had. Without her his life was worth nothing, so it was only logical that he should spend what remained of his ragged days in search of her. Saxxon stopped at nothing, and people died.

At length, he found her — after they had sawed open his head and removed his brain. He found her and 28 other people inside the MAYA, living a peaceful bucolic life in rough but comfortable shelters they had built for themselves in a meadow that seemed perpetually filled with wildflowers. Around them, far away at what seemed like the edge of their world, blue mountains — row upon row of them — framed the crystal-aired sky. They were all happy there, and the landscape of their world was as rounded, as wide, as three-dimensional, as it had been on the Outside. When they thought of the ugliness and pollution of the poisoned world from which they had been kidnapped, they embraced their new world — the Inside they called it — as their new Eden.

There was every reason to be happy in the MAYA, but Davvid Saxxon found cause to brood, nonetheless. Life on the Inside was easy, pleasant, the land was beautiful, and he had Isha, his wife. But it was a life Inside, a life inside the MAYA — it was not real, no matter how full of detail it appeared. And he wanted out. He wanted to go back to Socialzona and work there for those who suffered the Outside with all its diseases and deformities and drowned hopes.

"There is no way to reverse the process," Hunter told him. Hunter's shape was never entirely clear. His image flickered and wobbled when he appeared. He was the one person living on the Outside who communicated with them. Since he lived inside a body of flesh and bone and blood, he could only be partially connected to the MAYA. "But be

thankful," he assured Saxxon. "Diseases and plagues are depopulating the world. Socialzona is a charnal house. The MAYA is our only hope."

Saxxon had let his gaze drift off to the row upon row of blue mountains. Several times before he had heard this explanation, this justification for his life inside the machine.

"Your minds are at work now," Hunter said, "solving the problems we present it. And the way we utilize your minds, you are never aware of our operations. Right?"

Saxxon had to admit he was utterly unaware of anything but his own private life on the Inside. Yet he was on the Inside where there was only illusion. He still wanted out.

"Don't you want to help those on the Outside?" Hunter asked him.

"Of course I do. I just think . . . I could help them more if I were there. Out there." An idle thought floated into consciousness. He gave it words: "How do I know you're really doing the things you say you are?"

"Hunter's face changed perceptibly. Looking into his eyes was now like looking into the heart of an iceberg where only the faintest trace of blue sky was reflected. "You have to take my word for it, don't you?"

Saxxon pushed the speculation further: "How do I know we all aren't part of some kind of experiment that — that will be terminated when you find out what you want to know? And we'll be terminated along with everything else. How do I even know all this — including Isha and you — isn't a figment of my dreaming inside your precious MAYA?" Saxxon paused but Hunter only stared icily at him. "How can I know anything for sure?"

"You can't," Hunter said flatly. "You'll never know anything for sure, Saxxon. Get used to it." There was a quality in his voice Saxxon had never

heard before, a thin hard quality. He did not like it.

He and Hunter had been standing in the meadow beside a bed of spreading lavender. Although the sky remained as blue as before and the air was filled with warmth and the high-pitched buzzing of insects, Saxxon had never felt the chill of fear grip him so tightly. Hunter smiled faintly and his image, never steady, shimmered and dematerialized.

Saxxon looked across the meadow at the simple houses built by the people Inside. Never had he felt so alone or so afraid.

THE STREAM wound through the meadow like a carelessly dropped string. Out of the low grass, three granite boulders jutted through the ground, just where the meadow began lifting into green rolling hills. Saxxon sat on the highest of the three upturned chunks of granite. Below his feet, a black and yellow salamander nuzzled through the moist grass.

Saxxon wondered how long he had lived inside the machine — a year? Twenty years? He could never guess. Although the days flowed with soothing regularity Inside, Hunter had said that there was no smooth correlation between time Inside and time Outside. All he could be sure of was that he was not in the open air, in a meadow, sitting on a granite boulder — that he knew. He — or at least a small part of him — lay inside a bleak fortress in the middle of a bleak countryside. He remembered the beige hills, real hills, and the publicar track that had brought him in search of Isha. Now, in exchange for the use of his organic circuits, he had been given a forever of pleasant dreams.

Saxxon's eyes followed the meandering curl of the stream to a point near the horizon where it vanished under the purple mountains. The sky had grown lighter

while he sat there. Birds sang. But he knew he was not there and birds were not singing. The world lay elsewhere and was not like this.

"You may well live forever," Hunter had told him when he introduced Saxxon to his new world. "Forever! Imagine that." For Saxxon, *forever* held only its usual flat significance. It meant only "a long time".

Now he had begun to feel the word in his stomach — a light queasy feeling. He felt it in his bones. He hurt because he knew he really had no stomach nor any bones, nor eyes nor hands nor feet.

Saxxon opened his eyes and looked down the slope of the grey rock past his feet. There were two salamanders down there in the grass now. All illusion.

"Still brooding?"

Saxxon didn't turn his head. The voice was Hunter's. So was the tone. Insiders didn't speak to each other with such thinly disguised sarcasm.

"I'm watching the mountains grow," Saxxon said. "I have time enough for such pastimes now."

"Not anymore."

Saxxon looked at him now. He wore a yellow Spray-on suit, and his nearly-white hair seemed older than his face. The Insiders had speculated that he was near sixty — far older than Outsiders could normally expect to be.

"What do you mean by 'not anymore'?"

"This program involving the MAYA has been highly successful."

"You've told us that all along. So what's going to be different?"

"Many things." Hunter started off toward the settlement. "Come on. I have news for everyone." The words were usually words accompanied by a lighter tone. In Hunter's mouth, they sounded more like a threat.

Saxxon followed him at a distance across the meadow, away from the

stream. He wondered if they had been inside the MAYA long enough to accomplish all Hunter had said they were trying to do. Saxxon remembered with great pain the world Outside — the ozone layer stripped away, tumors bulging out of people's necks and faces like flowers about to break through the skin, land so poisoned that only stronger poisons would make anything grow, public fields set aside in which the mad could wander at their leisure and die as they would . . . Could all of this have been resolved?

"Saxxon!" the man called over his shoulder. "You told me once that maybe you weren't cut out for paradise. You don't have to worry yourself about that anymore." He seemed to be laughing to himself when he turned his face away.

It was then that Saxxon noticed the zeta shear hanging on Hunter's hip.

A few hundred meters ahead stood the village the thirty of them had built more out of habit than necessity. Here the rains were warm, there were no bothersome insects or animals, and the idea of privacy was a vaguely embarrassing memory.

He saw someone run from one cabin to another, then emerge from the door and rush to a third. By the bulk of the figure, Saxxon knew it was Clarsson, a man whose rolling gait made him seem to move like a bear. Clarsson ran out of the third cabin and saw Saxxon and Hunter approaching — he stopped in his tracks, then he began running toward them. Saxxon saw that the large man's face seemed to be twisted in a grimace of pain. He also saw Hunter's right hand lightly touch the butt of the zeta shear.

"Have you seen Denna?" Clarsson called out to them. "She's gone. She was sleeping beside me one moment and when I turned over she was gone. Just gone!" His greying hair stood up

on the back of his head where he had slept on it. The wide bands of muscles in his upper arms throbbed as he pressed his hands together in front of his chest. "Mr. Hunter, maybe you can help me. Maybe you can find her. I saw her just a few minutes ago." Seeing the man from the Outside seemed to calm him a little. He let his huge hands fall to his sides. "She was here just a few minutes ago."

"Everything's all right," Hunter said. Saxxon noticed that he kept a careful distance between himself and Clarsson. "Come on up here. I have some news for you Insiders."

"I thought she might've gone for a walk," Clarsson rambled on nervously. "She said last night she had a funny feeling, but..." His hands fluttered in front of his chest like heavy birds.

"I'll tell you all about it in a minute," Hunter said. He reached out and gave the larger man a quick pat on the back. "Tell everyone I'm here to talk to them."

"Sure." He bobbed his head and hurried away.

The Insiders were already emerging from their cabins. Excitement was unusual on the Inside, especially excitement that was tinged with unpleasantness. The thirty men and women and two children gathered in a casual semicircle around Hunter. They were not dressed in Spray-ons as was Hunter. They wore coarse garments that tied about their waists with soft cords. Dyes they had gathered from the meadow plants made the pastel blues and greens of the shirts and pants seem like a part of the landscape itself.

Hunter shifted his weight from foot to foot. Saxxon saw the eyes of several others stare at the zeta shear. Hunter rested his hands on his hips and opened his lips to speak.

"Say hello," Mortag said to his little boy and girl. "Tell Mr. Hunter hello." He nudged them forward.

Hunter closed his lips. One corner of his mouth twitched.

"Say hello," Mortag coaxed.

The children obeyed though their voices were inaudible.

"They've grown since you were here last," the father said. "Real children! You didn't think this could happen here, did you?"

Hunter smiled icily, but Mortag didn't see. He was running his hands through the children's hair. They snuggled against his thighs. "You know what I think?" Mortag said smugly. "And I'm not alone in this either. I think you've pulled a good one on us, Mr. Hunter. I think this MAYA thing you told us all about is... well, a fabrication." He chuckled and stood up a little straighter, as though to bolster his argument that way. "I think *this* is real. I do. I think you took us all to some place maybe on the other side of the earth or maybe even to another planet, and this is real. This isn't the Inside." He spoke the word with a trace of scorn. "This is all there is!" He pushed his children forward a little. "How, I ask you, how can you tell me these children aren't real?"

Hunter spoke before Mortag could say any more. "I'm not here to tell you anything about appearance and reality, Mr. Mortag."

Mortag looked smug, as though he had won every point.

"I am here only to tell you that the MAYA program has been a great success." He paused a moment. Saxxon noticed that Hunter gripped the butt of the zeta shear firmly in his hand. "And now, the MAYA program is being terminated. There has been a change in governments."

Isha, standing in the crowd, spoke

out. "What about us? Are we going to be 'terminated' too?"

"You can't fool me," Mortag said. "There is no MAYA program."

Hunter had drawn the zeta shear and pointed it at the Insiders. "The Calizonan Deocracy takes the attitude that you are to be pitied and allowed to expire as you should have when your bodies were taken from you."

"You're going to kill us!" Clarsson shouted. His face was reddening with rage. "You killed Deena! She didn't leave, she was murdered! You bastard!" Clarsson charged Hunter, his arms over his head like a rampaging bear.

Hunter sliced him in half vertically and again horizontally before he hit the ground. The shear used no heat, it simply disincorporated whatever the beam touched. Clarsson's body came apart like a piece of fruit slipping its skin. Hunter waved the shear at the others and they moved back.

"Listen to me," he said calmly. "The Deocracy does not believe in killing. You will be allowed to die naturally. All personnel are being discharged at this moment from attending the MAYA. What happens hereafter happens as the will of God, not as the will of man." His image flickered.

Saxxon felt his blood pounding in his head. His field of vision seemed to narrow from the sides by a swirling mass of grey.

"We have pity on you all," he was saying. "But the MAYA project was a violation of the natural order. Only with the punishment dealt out to us by a worldwide series of plagues were we able to see clearly."

Saxxon did not realize he could no longer think. He saw Hunter standing before them in his perfect yellow Spray-on suit — Hunter, the

executioner of them all.

"This is no punishment. We are simply acting on our pity."

Saxxon lunged at him and dived for his knees. The zeta shear flicked over his head. Two Insiders shrieked as they saw an arm and a leg fall from their bodies. Saxxon hit Hunter's knees solidly — and then there was nothing. His arms were full of empty air. Hunter had dematerialized and returned to the Outside.

"We won't die," Mortag was saying. "Don't you see? We *are* on the Outside. This *has* to be real."

Saxxon pulled himself to his feet. Hunter had dropped the zeta shear when he was hit and now Saxxon held it solidly in one hand. He stared at it as he muttered over and over, "I will kill him. I'll get out if I have to, but I will kill him."

Isha grabbed his shoulder and pointed with her free hand. "Look!" she said. "Look what's happening to Clarsson's body."

Now there could be no doubt, even in Mortag's mind. The oozing chunks of Clarsson's body seemed to shimmer where they lay on the meadow grass. The colors first were indistinct, then they ran together, and the body became transparent. At last, there was only the crushed grass where he had lain.

"He's gone," someone said doubtfully. "That means..."

"That means his brain has died inside the MAYA," Mortag said softly. He looked across the open space where the body had been. "What will happen to my children?" he asked Saxxon.

"They'll die when you do," Isha said.

The children looked at her with blank expressions. "Is that true, Daddy?" the little boy said.

It was then that the chaos began.

"What can we do?" "Where can we go?" "Who will be next?"

Saxxon took Isha's hand and backed away from the others. They could hear the shouting grow wilder behind them. "Let's go to our house," he said.

"We're at the mercy of the Outsiders," she said, once he had closed and latched the door behind them. "We've always known that, but..."

"But now we know the meaning of what we know."

She nodded. Someone ran past the front of their cabin.

"That's all there is to it," she said. "There's nothing we can do about it."

"I have this," Saxxon said, showing her the weapon. "I don't know what good it'll do me. But if I see Hunter again..."

"That probably wouldn't hurt him since he exists here even less than we do."

Saxxon laid the zeta shear carefully on the table beside the wicker basket of purple berries Isha kept there always. "I want to kill that man," he said under his breath.

"I know." Isha came round the table and put her arms around his neck. He pressed her against him. Her hair smelled like the air outside. "Let's go for a walk," she said. "We need to talk."

Outside their cabin they heard a thin voice crying, "No, no, no, no..."

They hurried away.

Wildflowers sprouted in thin scatterings across the meadow. When they had first come to this place, Saxxon had brought Isha bouquets every morning before she awakened. He placed the flowers in a wooden vase in the center of their one table. He never tired of seeing her hold back her long hair with her hands as she smelled them. She would get

dew on her nose.

One day Saxxon realized the flowers were prettier in the meadow than in the vase. Isha agreed.

They wandered now toward a spray of lavender and yellow blossoms.

"How long do you think we've been here?" he asked her.

"Four hundred thirty-seven days since you got here, Inside time. I was here... a hundred and twelve days was it? ... before you came."

"I think that's what you said you counted. But as nearly as I remember, it was only about a month from the day they drafted you till I was taken. So there's a time expansion here."

"I guess we'll never be sure." She put her arm around his waist.

A brown rabbit jumped in front of them and bounded away over the clumps of darker green grass.

Saxxon nodded toward the mountains that lay before them like a velvet rim around their world. "I always thought I might go for a walk into the mountains. Just to see them."

She squeezed him briefly. "There was time. If this hadn't happened."

"Yes."

They walked slowly. Flowers brushed their thighs.

"I have something I need to tell you," she said softly.

"What?" He stopped in midstride. He was feeling the fear again. The sun was no longer warm on his back.

"I could feel something last night. I never felt anything like it before. I saw Deena a few minutes and it didn't take long to find out that we were both having the same... the same whatever-it-was." She paused.

He wanted to ask her "What?" and push her on into an explanation, but he didn't. This was not a time when she would pause only to make him curious.

"We both had the feeling . . . here." She placed her hand just below her neck. "We both knew we were going to die. It isn't a vague feeling."

"You can't — I won't —" He could say nothing else. He took her in his arms. She held him.

A sudden breeze waved the flowers across the meadow. The far mountains were edged with clouds.

The village was different when they returned. There had been eighteen cabins, and now there were four. And that was not all. Where the meadow had been smooth and green and cool, it was now rough and spotted with dying grass and the air had an edge to it. Isha had rubbed her arms briskly as they approached the settlement. Saxxon could see her breath turn white in the air. As they approached their home, they had to pick their way across flats of mud where large flies buzzed and landed and sucked at the moisture. Saxxon saw white worms wiggle into Isha's footprints. It had rained while they were gone.

Jenkkins met them on the muddy trail that had been the central pathway of the village. He had been crying. "It's all coming to pieces," he said. "We're all going to die here. Everything is coming apart." He named those who had died, who had suddenly been seized with a smothering sensation, sometimes cried out, and then shimmered, the colors of their hand-dyed clothing becoming indistinct — And they dematerialized. They vanished.

Mortag and his wife and children were among the names Jenkkins numbered. "His wife died first," the big man said. His face he kept turned to the sky as he talked, as though he were hoping some god might grant his unspoken wish. "The little girl kept asking what happened to her mother. I was there and I saw it all. Mortag

tried to explain but he just kept . . . kept crying. I never saw —" He wiped his face with his huge hands. "Then it happened to him but he didn't see it at first. Jaimy, his little boy, pointed at him and said, 'Daddy, you're glowing.' And then the kids saw it was happening to them too. My god." He buried his face in his hands.

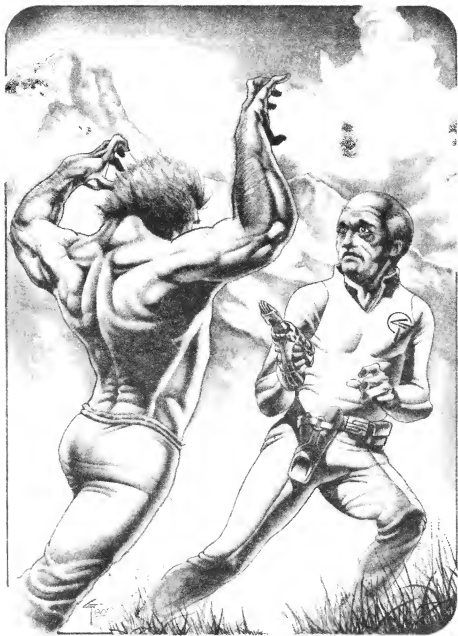
Saxxon felt an aching in his throat. He held Isha tighter.

"The kids," Jenkkins said, "they said, 'It tickles.' Can you imagine that. 'It tickles.' Then it happened to them all at the same time. The children were his own private illusions and when he died, they died. And they said it tickled." Grief filled his weeping. He seemed unaware of the presence of the others. "I'm next," he said. "I can feel it like the others. Goodbye to you." He reached out and shook hands with Isha and then with Saxxon, his hand dwarfing theirs. "Goodbye," he said one more time, then he turned and walked away.

"Let's go inside," Isha said. "I need to be alone with you now."

Saxxon stopped just outside their doorway and pointed to the mountains. "Look, something is happening there too." The peaks were steeper and sharper now, more like the teeth of some carnivorous jaw. The distant meadow had turned a dead straw color. "Everything is getting so ugly." He pushed open the door and they went inside. Isha sat on the edge of their cot. They both saw the berries in the bowl but neither said anything. Isha had gathered them the evening before and now they were a rotting mass of mold.

"We don't have much time," she whispered in the silence and shadows of the room. He sat beside her and then they lay back together. The smell of musty air filled the room. "My



love..." she said, turning to face him. Her hand clutched the back of his shirt. "All the time we've had together has been so much and... so little."

Saxxon held her face in his hands. Her dark curls spilled over his fingers. "Isha, hold tight to me."

"Yes."

"I love you."

"Hold me," she said. "Hold me." Her breath warmed his face. "Hold me," she said.

His arms closed on themselves. Sickness and night overwhelmed him. She was gone. He lay alone on the cot.

"Isha!" he screamed. He leaped off the bed and frantically looked around the room, half expecting to find her giggling with her fingertips held to her laughing lips. But he was alone. "Isha!" he cried.

His thoughts were seared by her image, by the image of Hunter as he said, "The Deocracy does not believe in killing. You will be allowed to die naturally."

"Hunter! I will kill you! I won't die! I will kill you!"

The zeta shear swept across the cabin. The table, the shelf of clay dishes, the wooden vase, and the walls separated from themselves.

He ran from the cabin, the shear still humming in his hand. He sliced the cabin a hundred different directions and when it was no more than a heap of wet splinters, he realized that it was pouring rain and that he was so stiff with cold he could hardly lower the arm that had been firing the shear.

And it was then that he realized that only he stood in the meadow. There were no other buildings remaining. No other person had been spared. Saxxon stood on the plain alone, and the rain fell heavily.

SAXXON LAY in a field of mud and burrs. The rain had turned into a slow cold drizzle. He staggered to his feet, his arms wrapped around himself. Nothing remained of the village, and the footpath between the cabins was now a shallow ditch where muddy water collected in shallow pools. Reflected in them was a dark sky that was rimmed by ragged mountain peaks. Saxxon turned where he stood, the gummy mud sucking at his feet. He saw nothing but wet desolation and loneliness. He was hungry.

"Isha..." he called softly. "Isha!"

He stared at the low pile of splintered rubble that had been their home. He saw a piece of her wooden comb. She had carved it herself from a scrap of wood she found floating down the meadow stream. A white fragment was probably part of her china cup. And beneath a sheared board he pushed aside with his foot, he found a carved rectangular fragment of the wooden vase he had once faithfully filled every morning with wildflowers. He put it in his pocket. It would be the only thing he would keep that belonged to her. It and his memories would be enough.

He sat down beside the rubble and waited. As Isha had told him, he expected to feel his coming death in his chest first. He waited. Rain plastered his dark hair flat to his head and dripped into his eyes. He waited. He did not die. He only grew colder and stiffer.

Why he should live and the others die was a question he knew he had no hope of answering.

At length, Saxxon decided to stand on his feet. Since he had no direction, one way was the same as the other, so he followed the stream toward the mountains. What he would find there,

he hoped, was forgetfulness. The burden of loss that he carried was heavier than any physical weight. If he were lucky beyond measure, he thought, he might find peace there — and if that involved dying, he would not resist.

Along the mushy banks of the stream, Saxxon pulled up plants with fat bulbous roots and ate them. They were bitter but they filled his aching stomach.

When night came, he slept curled up like a child while the rain intermittently soaked him. In the night, when he awakened with shivering, he remembered Isha's telling him how he could have explored the mountains while they were all living peacefully in the meadow. Yes, he thought, and now I will do that, unless I die first. Then he thought of Hunter. His shivering stopped as adrenaline poured through his veins.

Hunter's image hovered over him like the angel of death. "The Deocracy does not believe in killing," he said through a grim smile. "You will be allowed to die naturally." Saxxon quickly got to his feet, the zeta shear ready in his hand. But it had been a figment of his imagination only. Hunter was nowhere in this world. When he did appear, Saxxon thought, he would kill him. He would leave nothing of the man but a film on the ground of dissociated molecules. Saxxon's heart pounded and he no longer felt the chill of the wind. Although it was dark, he began his trek to the mountains. Against the black, cloud-covered sky, the jagged peaks rose like the blacker teeth of some open-mouthed carnivore.

From the edge of the cliff he could see the meadow — now a mud-flat — from one end to the other. It

looked no larger than his hand held at arm's length, and the stream was a faint brown line that wavered through its middle. Of the village, nothing was visible.

Behind him, the mountains rose far higher than he now stood. Between the clefts of the nearest peaks, he saw succeeding rows of mountain ranges, each range smaller and greyer than the one in front of it. Near him, steep ravines separated one peak from the other. Only in sheltered clefts did he see any vegetation. Food would be scarce.

He turned his back on the meadow. Before him lay an endless array of difficult paths he could choose. He chose not to choose. He would simply walk, climbing where necessary, descending where he had to. If there were any determining factor, it would be food and water. And somehow, somewhere, he would find Hunter and butcher him, or he would find a peaceful place to wait for his own extinction, or he would find a way out of the Inside — then he would find Hunter and lay him open for sucking insects to feed on. Once again, he felt his blood pulsing in his neck and his face.

Saxxon walked into the mountains.

ON THE twenty-second day he heard a voice behind him, Hunter's voice. "Die now!" it said. "Die here!"

Saxxon stumbled as he spun around, the zeta shear humming in his hand. Boulders slid apart as the weapon sliced them in half. Smaller rocks tumbled down the cliff-face, knocking him off his feet. As he fell, he heard it again.

"Die now, Saxxon! Die here!"

He twisted his torso and fired in another direction. Again there was no one. He scrambled to his feet, firing

the zeta shear the whole time, slicing the rocks and boulders again and again, spinning to find the voice and always seeing only the bleak landscape. Even when the voice no longer mocked him from the inside of his head, he held the humming shear in his hands, cutting and slicing everything within range.

He fell to his knees and wept. "I want to die," he heard himself saying. "I won't die. I won't. I want to die."

On the forty-sixth day he realized that the glass-surfaced pool and the tall motionless trees that lined its banks were not real. In a blank-minded daze he had been walking toward the mountain lagoon for hours but it never came any nearer. Finally, a spark of insight lit up that one crucial piece of information he needed: *You are going out of your mind. You need food. You need water. You need rest.*

He looked away from the mirage and then looked back at it. Nothing had changed. Straining with the effort, he estimated the distance to be no further than fifty or sixty paces. So he counted his steps — that was the hard part. His mind wandered this way and that like one of the intoxicated madmen that wandered the roads of Socalizona.

When he got to sixty paces, he looked at the mirage again. It appeared to be about fifty paces further on. From the center of the smooth water, a shape gathered and slowly rose. It seemed to be made of the water itself. First it was merely an elongated lump. Then features gradually started forming.

Saxxon watched it with great intensity. Only sporadically did the thought edge into his consciousness that he himself was manufacturing this spectacle.

The rising glob of fluid gathered and shaped itself into the semblance of a human head and shoulders.

Saxxon smiled. He suspected it would do that.

As it grew taller, it grew more distinct. And then Saxxon pulled out the zeta shear. He did not smile now.

"You are going mad, my friend," Hunter said out of the pond. "Come closer and we will find peace together."

Saxxon pulled the trigger and swept the beam a dozen directions across the mirage. Hunter laughed, and every time Saxxon touched him with the beam of the shear, a great illumination shined through Hunter's skin and eyes.

"Come closer, Saxxon. Give me more." The shape rose higher out of the lagoon.

Saxxon ran at it, indistinct words, curses, spitting from his lips.

"Closer, come closer!"

Almost casually, a thought settled in Saxxon's mind: *You're doing what he's asking you do do. Why give him what he wants?* So he pulled up and stopped. A thousand meters below him, a small stream wound between the rounded rocks at the bottom of the chasm. When he looked up, across into open space where the tree-lined lagoon had been a moment before, he saw only the sharp peaks or a parallel string of mountains. He stepped back from the cliff and holstered the shear in the sling he had made from his shirt.

He found a place where he could sit and lean back. Yes, he thought, *I need food and rest.*

He looked at his hands. They were only barely recognizable as his own. The knuckles had been scraped and re-scraped in the same places so that any time he clenched his fist, the black scabs broke open. The ache

along the inside of his upper arm reminded him of the fall he'd taken several days before. He had been climbing to reach a weedy plant that had looked marginally edible. It had had no roots and the coarse leaves had cut his tongue in two places.

He pressed his stomach with his fingertips. There were no hunger pains. Perhaps, he thought, he could go a little longer before having to look for food. He stood up and fell over.

With his face pressed in the loose dirt, he managed a feeble smile. Wrong again, he thought. The image of a laughing Hunter flickered in his mind. Saxxon got to his feet.

It was night by the time he reached the stream in the ravine. The cold water soothed his bleeding knuckles. In the darkness he felt along the edges of the water until he found several small plants. These he ate. The bulbs at the root ends were bitter, but not so bitter that he thought he would throw them up.

He stayed there three days. On the fourth day, he continued on, toward the west.

On the sixty-first day after leaving the meadow, he saw the signal blinking at the furthest edge of the western horizon. Between him and the light he counted fifteen peaks. He hoped to reach it, whatever it was, in fifteen days. For the first time in weeks, the heavy, sickly haze that clouded his every thought seemed to lift. Now there was a Someplace in this vast range of anonymous peaks. Now he had a place to go.

Twenty-seven days later he had lost sight of the beacon. He lay back against a pile of shattered granite and toyed with the zeta shear. He let his fingers play near the trigger. The safety was off. He balanced it on his

fingertips, the emission point very near his face. It started to fall and he grabbed it with his free hand — his fingers brushed the trigger.

As the zeta shear tripped over his fingers, he remembered a friend he'd had before — years before, on the Outside. He had been a funny little man. Saxxon held the shear steady a moment while he pulled the man's name out of his memory.

Rimly was his last name. Gorman. Gorman Rimly. Gorman was always on suspension for some infraction of the worker's code. For the most part, it had seemed to Saxxon that Rimly rarely inhabited the inside of his head.

One day they had worked on the same detail — tank scrubbing. It was estimated that for every day spent in the tanks, one lost two months of the anticipated lifespan. Saxxon's punishment was to work there only two days. Rimly, it seemed, would be there indefinitely. If he refused to do the work, he would be sent to the Hawaiian Gardens Hospital for the Potentially Ill — and from there it was usually only a matter of days until selected pieces of one's anatomy ended up at the Nixon Organ Bank.

But Gorman Rimly seemed to like his work. He seemed to like everything.

"Why do you do this?" Saxxon had asked him. "Why don't you try to get across the line to Nevanostra? You'd have a chance anyway."

"No chance," Rimly had said. "They watch me all the time. They wait for me to run. I don't mind this, and I don't want to die."

"But working in here poisons your system."

"I have a good life," he said with a smile. "If I run, I die. Whatever you got, Mr. Saxxon, compared to death, it's a picnic."

Saxxon spun the zeta shear once

more. It fell to the ground, landing with its trigger propped up on a tiny spike of granite. The emission point aimed dead center at his left eye. For a second he did not breathe. Then:

"Thank you, Mr. Rimly."

Saxxon holstered the shear and got to his feet.

He caught sight of the beacon the next day shortly before sunset. It was off to the right further than he would have guessed. It blinked every ten to fifteen seconds. The mountains in the west were edged with orange from the setting sun. He counted six peaks between him and the light source. He hoped he would be there in ten days.

It did not take that long.

On the eighth day he walked along a ridge that joined the signal peak only a hundred meters below its summit. Even from there, he could see them waving to him. The two figures were dressed in a shade of green that made them seem to shimmer against the blue of the sky.

As for Saxxon's own clothing, most of it had disintegrated or been ripped off him by repeated abrasions. The rope about his waist still held the zeta shear, and all that remained of his pants was barely enough to cover his loins. His shirt had long since been torn in strips to bind up his bleeding legs and arms.

An hour from the moment he first saw the people, he rounded a large oblong boulder and met them face to face. The two of them wore bright green Spray-ons and stood facing where he emerged, as though they fully expected him at that moment. Above them, on a slender stalk of metal tubing, the signal beacon blipped its millionth-of-a-second flash.

Saxxon touched the butt of the zeta shear.

"You made it," one of them said

simply. He smiled.

Saxxon opened his mouth to speak, but a dozen questions collided in his mind at once, and nothing issued from his voice.

"It took you a little less time than we thought it would," the other said.

"Who — Are you real?" Saxxon finally said.

"As real as anything on the Inside. We're here to take you back to the Outside. We're getting you out of here, Mr. Saxxon."

"There are details that probably won't please you," the other said. "But we are getting you out of the Inside."

Saxxon glanced from one figure to the other. They were identical, and they looked very much the way he remembered seeing himself when he was Outside. Although he saw the striking resemblance, there was a difference between their features and the way his had been — there seemed to be no sexuality in these people. Their faces were smooth and unmarked by the growth of a beard or by the passage of time.

Saxxon sat back weakly on a nearby stone. He openly laid the zeta shear across his thighs. "Who are you?" he asked.

"There's so much to tell you," one said. "And we could be on our way in the meantime."

"I have plenty of time," Saxxon said. "Who are you? You're from the Outside, right?"

"Yes," one said. "From the Outside, but not from the Earth."

"Not from the Earth," Saxxon repeated flatly.

"No. Apparently our appearance upset him," one said to the other. "We didn't want to alarm you, sir. We came to take you to a place we've fixed up for you. We don't think you'd much like Earth anymore."

"What's wrong with it?"

"There were diseases. Those who didn't die from disease weren't able to survive once there weren't enough trained people to manufacture environmental support systems."

"No one is left?" Saxxon's hand rested heavily on the shear but his attention was elsewhere — he didn't even feel it under his hand. "No one?"

"There are numerous rodents and insects."

Saxxon leaned forward a little. "Where were you planning to take me?"

"Offworld. We only have the code designation and the destination program. Are you ready to leave?"

"Who are you? You haven't told me yet."

One of them scratched his sideburn. A quick look of puzzlement crossed his face. "In our native shape we don't speak as we seem to be doing here, Mr. Saxxon. We don't actually have inter-being communication. You see, we're only one animal. There is only one of us. We don't need language, so I'm afraid I can't tell you who we are."

"I'm sorry," the other said.

"Where are you from?" Saxxon suspected the answer he would get. He got it:

"Same problem. The place isn't called anything. I don't need to tell myself where I am." He gave Saxxon a helpless little smile.

"So I'm the last person and you're taking me to a zoo of some kind? Why?"

We don't know for sure that you're the last person, sir," the one on the left said. "The MAYA protected you from the diseases so many died from. There may be a few others, but we don't know where they are." He spread out his hands as though feeling for raindrops. "We do know where

you are."

"It isn't a zoo," the other said in a lower tone. "There is another of your species there already. We did that earlier."

"Who? A man, a woman?"

"We couldn't say, sir. We... Your language is so feeble for distinctions of this kind. The animal that I am a part of collected this member of your race with a part of itself that did not include us." The two of them looked at each other with doubtful expressions on their faces. They shrugged their shoulders simultaneously. "We aren't very good in these bodies," said the one on the right.

Saxxon chuckled. It was the first time in weeks he had done so. It hurt his sides. His ribs were badly bruised from the falls he had taken daily.

"We might as well go now," he said. "I don't think I'd understand any more of your answers. I do know that I want to get back to the Outside — even if I can't go home. Will I ever be able to go back?"

"It's likely," one said. "But it might take some time."

"The Gate is this way," the other said, gesturing to the other side of the beacon.

Saxxon sheathed the zeta shear, stood up, and cautiously followed the pair. "What is this Gate?"

"It's where we get back to our ship." They were following a path they had worn in the shards of granite. Saxxon stayed a good four meters behind them. "Since we are, at present, inside the MAYA, we are disembodied. The Gate will take us out of here, re-embody us, and place us on our ship above the Earth. Then we leave."

"How are you going to re-embody me?" Saxxon asked. "They ground up my bones a long time ago. What are you going to put me into?"

"We're giving you a part of ourselves — a piece of our material."

Saxxon held back. It was too incredible. Either he was hallucinating again or these people worked for Hunter and this was one of his intricate punishments. Since Saxxon had refused to die, Hunter could be planning to make him destroy himself. He drew the zeta shear — and then he saw the Gate.

Never had he seen anything like it before. The wonder of it made his doubting seem small. There was nothing complicated-looking about it. There wasn't even much to it. It hung in mid-air, about the dimensions of a good-sized door, only a little lower. When he looked behind it, at the backside, he saw that it had no depth. In fact, from that side, it was not there at all. But from the front, it was a sparkling curtain of silver and grey. It shimmered as though water were running through it and catching the sun.

"You will follow us?" one said.

Saxxon didn't answer. The thing was opaque — anything could lay beyond it.

The one nearest it walked into it and vanished.

"Would you like for me to go before you or after you?"

Saxxon looked behind him. In all directions lay the desolate and rugged landscape of the Inside. There were no people here. No animals. No birds broke the silence that wrapped the mountains like heavy bandages. There was nothing here for Saxxon. But whether he would be alive when he stepped through the Gate — that held him back.

The other figure walked through the Gate. The glittering curtain rippled behind him.

Saxxon recalled little Gorman Rimly scrubbing the poisons off the

insides of those tanks.

"Gorman," he'd asked him once. "Aren't you afraid of dying?"

"Dying? Life is very interesting. But dying may be more interesting than this," he said with a grin, waving the handbrush that dripped with blue xerbilex.

Saxxon took one more quick look at the Gate and walked straight into it.

Yes, he thought, as a line of cool air suddenly passed over his body, this will be very interesting.

WHEN ONE of them told Saxxon that the other side of the Gate would let them out on the orbiting "ship," Saxxon envisioned a mile-long bullet-shaped structure with viewports and arrays of antennae around the hull. That was not what he saw.

Through a wide, panoramic transparent panel, Saxxon saw the Earth spread across a curving horizon, orange and blue and white smearing one into the other like a painting where the colors ran together. That was what he saw first. What captured his sense of wonder was the alien ship, some of which was visible through the same panel, superimposed against the colors of Earth.

This "ship" looked more like a clutter of broken jackstraws than any kind of intelligent structure. Perhaps once, he thought, it was a delicate, symmetrical webwork of brace and counterbrace — now looking as though it had been crushed in some huge fist.

"We'll be leaving now," one of the men said.

Saxxon looked around for someplace to sit or lie down. Along one bulkhead was a bank of translucent rectangles. One of them blinked regularly; the remainder were colorless. Doors sealed each end of

the cabin they occupied, and the remaining wall had nearly all its surface covered by the transparent panel. There was no place to sit. The deck had nothing on it that obscured any part of its surface.

"Do you want me to... to be someplace in particular?" Saxxon asked. He expected formchairs to slide out of the bulkheads.

One of the aliens glanced quizzically at him. "Be anywhere you choose. You might prefer to observe from where you stand."

The other person held a dark metallic cube in his fingers so Saxxon would see it. "This is the destination program. We simply insert it into the pilot and it does the rest of the work." He pointed to a small section of the bulkhead near the translucent rectangles. Saxxon realized he was pointing to a rack of closely fitted destination program cubes. "These take us where we wish to go."

The alien pushed the small cube he held into blinking rectangle.

Saxxon waited for something to happen. He waited to be pushed against some side of the cabin by the acceleration. But there was nothing.

Until he looked at the viewpanel. Earth had vanished and stars streaked away behind them to a vanishing point inside the crazy jackstraw framework of the ship.

Saxxon's hand touched the panel. He turned to the two men. "I thought nothing could go..." He glanced back at the screen. "Could go this fast."

"We don't go that fast... not exactly." He looked to his partner. "We do but we don't." They both shrugged simultaneously. "What you see out there isn't happening." They seemed embarrassed. "It's a representation of what it would look like if we were travelling as fast as

we're... 'slipping'."

"Slipping?"

"We thought you'd like the picture."

"I like the picture fine. What's 'slipping'?"

"We have problems with the words, sir," one said.

"We ooze away from Earth," said the other. "We stop being here and start being somewhere else."

"But we do it slowly."

"Like oozing. Except we don't have to be between places."

They waited for Saxxon to indicate comprehension.

"I'll remember what you just said the next time I want to ask you something."

One of the aliens stepped closer to Saxxon. "We are very different, sir. In all likelihood you will never understand us any better than we understand you. You are very strange to us."

"Your rigid body structure is unfamiliar to us," the other said.

"More peculiar," the nearer one said confidentially, "is your psychological arrangement. You actually believe you are an independant being, unconnected to any other living being except by a few gradually fading emotional attachments. Isn't that lonely?"

"How did you know that about me?" Saxxon's face tightened up. "You know what I'm thinking, don't you?"

"We apologize, sir." The nearer of the two turned away, his face a mask of shame.

"It's necessary if we aren't to be offensive. You would think we were unpleasant more than likely."

Saxxon slowly swung around and stared out the port. Stars raced back to the vanishing point. He wasn't paying much attention to what he

saw. More than anything he wanted to know what he had got himself into. The aliens didn't seem dangerous. In fact, their feelings were all too easily hurt. They were like children. He reminded himself that they probably experienced, in some corner of their very odd minds, the feelings he was having at that moment.

"We only have one mind, sir."

Yes, they were listening.

"Right," Saxxon said. "You told me that already, didn't you. Look. Maybe if you told me why you're doing this, I could relax a little."

"We've been making you nervous," one of them said sadly.

"Yes, you've been doing that. Tell me, who am I to you that you'd take me out of the MAYA and go to the trouble of putting me somewhere — where? — halfway across the galaxy where I can live? Why bother?"

They both smiled. "We have to do something with our time."

"Come on. Give me the truth for once. Just the plain, unadorned truth."

"Mr. Saxxon, we don't know what else to tell you. We passed by your Earth. We knew where you were. We were there, you were there. We do things like that. You can't expect us to remain inactive for our duration."

"And what is your 'duration'?"

The two aliens looked at each other. "We think we will die when the universe collapses."

"You aren't sure?" Saxxon said with a touch of irony in his voice.

"No sir. One time it collapsed we did die. Another time we didn't. The other times, something happened to us that wasn't either thing."

Saxxon shook his head. He was not aware he was doing it. "And it was me you picked out of the MAYA."

"Yes sir." They both grinned proudly. "Behind you, sir, perhaps

you would care to watch as we leave your galaxy. Of course, we aren't really *leaving the galaxy*, but if we were, *that's what it would look like*. To your eyes. Sort of."

The other one shrugged. "Our machines . . . We don't have the color distortions quite right. We forgot about how your eyes see color."

"Sorry," the other one said. "Maybe we can adjust it for you."

Saxxon waved them away. "Don't bother. I won't know the difference." He was beginning to like their little-boy-caught-fouling-up-the-works attitude. Like, he decided, perhaps wasn't quite the right word. They were disarming. And for Saxxon, someone who didn't show open hostility was someone he felt he should like. The things the two of them told him about themselves were intimidating enough — if they were true, and he suspected they were — but the way they said those things, he felt little or no threat at all.

Saxxon turned to the viewpanel. The last clouds of stars in the wispy outer arms of the Milky Way had just passed around the ship. Since the viewpanel showed them travelling outward on roughly the same plane as the galaxy, ragged rifts of unilluminated gasses cut across the center of the edge-on disk. Within several minutes the Milky Way was only one of several hazy spots of light on the viewpanel. They travelled now through starless space.

Saxxon was beginning to tire of standing. He turned, looking for someplace to sit. The two near-identical aliens stood frozen in the position he had last seen them — one had a hand reaching up toward one of the translucent rectangles, the other stood near him, one hand on his hip, the other casually gesturing, palm up, in front of his chest. Saxxon thought

they had died — or at least that something had gone dreadfully wrong.

Then the one who had been reaching upward continued the movement of his arm. He withdrew a small cube — apparently another destination cube — and started to hand it to Saxxon. But he stopped, froze again, when he saw the expression on Saxxon's face.

"What happened to you?" Saxxon asked, the chill of fear again running through him. This was all he needed: finally to be taken from MAYA, brought to the edge of the galaxy and then abandoned, left to drift with the rigid corpses of some odd beings he understood no better in life than he would when they were dead.

"We did not mean to frighten you, sir," one of them said humbly.

"We were temporarily elsewhere."

"It would seem sir, that you would like to sit down."

"Yes, I would," Saxxon admitted. In fact, his knees were near buckling.

The two aliens glanced at each other. "You wish a chair?"

"That would make sitting more comfortable. What's wrong?"

They were looking embarrassed again. "We will gladly give you a chair, sir, but understand that it will require a transformation — not of you. A transformation of one of us."

"Unless you wouldn't mind if we opened this hatch and permitted more of our substance..."

Saxxon said nothing — he knew he would only babble if he did try to speak. This was making less sense every moment. Finally: "I don't care. Do what you want. I don't care."

They both smiled and nodded obsequiously. "You wouldn't mind then if we dropped our bodies?" one asked.

"Your form is... restrictive," the

other said.

"I don't care," Saxxon said. "This is all..."

"It must be confusing. Allow us to arrange a chair."

One of them released the lock on the hatch. When it opened, Saxxon leaped away from it to the far end of the cabin. A heavy, viscous lump oozed over the threshold. It was the size of several men and was the color of very slightly translucent lead. It looked like a thing that belonged inside a package of skin.

The two aliens never looked at Saxxon. Their pleasantly smiling faces directed all their attention toward the ooze. One of them shut the hatch, cutting the thing into two parts. Most of it remained in the adjoining cabin.

As Saxxon watched, the shapeless thing gathered itself together, became more or less rectangular, piled up on itself, and then grew a backrest and two armrests. Its final action was to set its color. It seemed not to know exactly which hue of blue-grey to choose. The colors shuddered lighter and darker and at last settled into a deep cobalt blue.

"Your chair, Mr. Saxxon."

He realized suddenly the great pain he had inflicted on himself by pressing his back so firmly against the lock of the aft hatch. He came away from the bulkhead. "What was that thing?" He pointed to the hatchway the thing-that-was-now-a-chair had come through.

"It is we."

Saxxon shook his head. "Among many things here, that is another one I don't understand." He let himself slump into the chair.

"We mentioned earlier that we were not comfortable in our present form. *That* was our native shape."

"That glob of . . . ?"

"Precisely. You are sitting on us, also."

Saxxon looked at the synthetic-looking armrest under his hand. "I'm surprised at nothing anymore."

"Then you wouldn't mind if we . . . ?"

Saxxon chuckled. "If you slipped into something more comfortable? I would be unkind if I objected to the comfort of my hosts," he said with exaggerated gentility.

"We will continue to speak with you through this," one of them said. He placed his hand on the bulkhead. It seemed to double into a fist — Saxxon realized, though, that something else was happening. The fist became more boxlike, then it flattened; it had become a speaker panel. *

Saxxon stared as the alien seemed to scrape his blunt wrist down the bulkhead, leaving a thin trail of "himself" that reached down to the floor.

"Please do not be repelled," came a voice from the speaker.

Saxxon realized they knew him well. His stomach tightened and queased as he watched the two bodies begin to lose definition, to sag on themselves and finally slump into a grey, shapeless mound on the deck.

"That's your . . . normal shape?" Saxxon asked.

"Yes," the speaker said. Saxxon noticed that the thin cord that stretched from the speaker down the bulkhead was connected to the alien on the deck. "You would call it our 'pre-shape.' From this we become those devices we need in order to do the things we do."

"You become things," Saxxon said, as though trying to absorb this information.

"The entire ship around you is me."

Saxxon turned and looked out the viewpanel again. Between the

jackstraw spars of the ship, only an occasional wisp of light could be seen.

"Everything here is you? All of it?"

"All of it," the speaker repeated. "Your chair, the deck, the ship's exterior structure. Everything."

Saxxon let himself slump in his chair. It adjusted to accommodate his movement. For a second it alarmed him and he tensed up. Again the chair adjusted to fit him.

"What the hell," he thought, as he stretched out. The chair reformed itself. He watched the wisps of galaxies pass around the body of the ship and converge at a point back of them. He rested.

For the first time in months — it seemed like years — he rested. A thin tendril of the alien reached up from the deck. Balanced on the tip of it was the cube that it had begun to offer him a few minutes earlier while it was in human shape.

"What is it?" Saxxon asked.

"A destination program to take you back to Earth. We want you to have it as a gesture of our good will. We don't want you to feel imprisoned. If you want to return to Earth, insert it in the blinking panel."

Saxxon turned to look at the bulkhead that was covered with the hundreds of small rectangles. Fifth from the right, bottom row, one of the panels blinked at him. He memorized the position. "I just hold onto it?" he asked.

"Yes. You may return at any time."

"You said Earth was uninhabitable now."

"It is, but you may return if you wish."

Saxxon swiveled the chair to face the viewpanel again. He would exercise his option at a later time.

He realized as he watched the distant galaxies fade in the distance that something in him had changed

since he had boarded the ship. He tried to identify it, to put it in words. In more ways than one, he had left Isha behind. Isha, the MAYA, Hunter, all of them remained behind on a poisoned world. And he, Saxxon, was headed elsewhere, to a place where according to his rescuers there resided another survivor. He would welcome company that came in a recognizable form and had recognizable responses in a normal conversation.

Saxxon realized he had dozed off. At first he upbraided himself but then realized that it was a good sign. He hadn't been at ease enough in the last months to do any more than sleep fitfully. When he awakened now, he felt refreshed. Perhaps this could be a new beginning. Perhaps the death and fear and ugliness he had known all his life on Earth could be pushed out of his mind. He stood up.

"Could I go for a walk?" he asked. This, it seemed, would be something he could do to both occupy himself and perhaps learn a few things about the thing... the person?... he travelled with.

The viscous lump on the deck opened a pathway to the aft hatchway. "Feel free to go wherever you wish. You'll be fully looked after," the speaker said. At that moment the hatchway opened.

Saxxon stepped through. This cabin was longer than the other one. The walls were curved outward instead of squared as the others had been. Other than several small conduits which ran from one end of the cabin to the other, it was utterly empty. He went through the next hatch.

Here, the walls were lined with pipes, dozens of them of all sizes. Saxxon laid a hand on one of the larger ones. He could feel a vibration

in it, as though some particulate matter were rushing through the inside. He wondered if these were the creature's veins and arteries. He opened the next hatchway.

"Welcome, Mr. Saxxon," the blond woman said. She was beautiful and wore only enough that one might think, for a moment, that modesty played some minor role in her character.

He started to speak, but when he saw the others behind her, he could say nothing. Six women, all lovely, all a hairsbreadth from being naked, smiled, nodded, and said hello.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"Mr. Saxxon, you always demand that things be so carefully spelled out."

"Where did you come from?" he repeated. "They told me there was only one other survivor from Earth." He thought again. "You are from earth?"

The brown woman came close to him and took his hand. "We are the alien. That is, I am the alien." She smiled, her teeth as white as paper, and rested her cheek against his shoulder.

"And I am the alien," the blond said.

"And I," said another. "As are the rest of us."

"I don't understand," Saxxon said. "Why are you... shaping yourself like this?"

"For you," the dark woman crooned. "I thought you would like me this way."

"Don't you like me in these shapes?" the blond said, pulling herself against him. Her breasts pressed on his chest. One of her legs moved between his.

"I don't know," Saxxon said. Desperation mixed with a rapidly growing sense of the ridiculous. He

began laughing. "I'd like you if this was what you are, but it isn't." He disentangled himself from the two women. "I don't know what you are, but you aren't these women."

"You see me," said one of the other four women. She moved to the front. She was taller than the others, and Saxxon had never seen or expected to see a body as developed as hers was. "You can touch me. How else does one distinguish real from unreal?" She took his hand and placed it on the concavity of her waist. Through the filmy chemise he could feel the warmth of her skin. "Now I am what you see. Later, I will be something else."

"Like a pipe or a speaker panel," Saxxon said pleasantly. She was undeniably beautiful, but, he realized, she was not human — it made a difference.

"Yes. I can be many things." She draped an arm over his shoulder. Her face was close to his and her breath was warm and sweet. "But, now, I am this."

Saxxon felt a pulse of desire. Then he started laughing. The idea of having an intimate relationship with something that a while before was perhaps part of the fuel system struck him as very funny.

The women were crestfallen.

The brown woman spoke first. "Is there anything you would like for me to be that would give you pleasure?"

"I can't think of a thing. I want you to know, I appreciate the effort you've made here. I mean it." He tried to wipe the grin off his face. "Maybe I could just walk around a while."

"We'll be here if you want us," the tall one said.

Saxxon went on through the next hatch. He wondered if the alien had other surprises waiting for him. Saxxon's zeta shear caught on the

door as he went through. He'd nearly forgotten he still carried it. Hunter, he thought instantaneously. He was carrying the zeta shear for Hunter. He had wanted to give him one good rip with it before he died. Now it appeared Hunter was already dead and there was some likelihood Saxxon would never return to Earth.

Saxxon absent-mindedly touched the destination cube in his pants pocket.

The cabin beyond that in which he'd met the women was nearly empty. It appeared to be some kind of cargo storage area. Only two large cartons sat on the deck. Neither seemed to be easily openable so Saxxon passed them by. He admitted a great curiosity about what the creature would be transporting besides himself.

Transporting itself, most likely, he thought. When you're this big, what easier way is there than to put your extra parts in cartons and carry them off?

When he opened the next hatch, he held the shear close to his hip so it wouldn't hang him up. The light in this cabin was quite dim. He stepped over the threshold.

"Welcome, Mr. Saxxon," he heard a familiar voice say smugly.

The tone alone made him draw the zeta shear. When his eyes finally focussed on the man who stood in the gloom in front of him, he released the safety and aimed.

"Hunter! I don't believe my luck. How did the alien know I wanted you?"

"You wanted to thank me, no doubt." Hunter wore a yellow Spray-on, as usual. His expression was smug — that never changed.

"Yes," Saxxon said, "I wanted to thank you in my own personal way. I wanted to slice you up like a piece of

meat. This is my thanks for putting us in the MAYA and then turning it off."

"Mr. Saxxon, if I'd known you were going to repay me like this —"

"What could you have done to me worse than you did? You killed my wife. You murdered her."

"I couldn't help that. There was a change of government. But I did see to it that your section of the MAYA was not deactivated."

"So I was left alone in there. That was punishment for what? I may have something about you figured out, Hunter. Loneliness is a way of life for you — a condition of being — so you have no idea how awful it is for anyone else. Right?"

Hunter shrugged his shoulders, turning his palms outward in a gesture of smug helplessness. "You have the weapon," he said.

"Yes, I have the weapon, and I have one regret, Hunter. I regret this won't be slower." He aimed the shear at the man's face. He squeezed the trigger and brought the beam straight down to the deck. He expected Hunter to be cut in half. This did not happen.

Hunter laughed. In his dark face, his mouth opened in a wide, black laugh that echoed from the bulkheads.

Saxxon fired again, cutting across him twice. The beam cut nothing. Hunter laughed louder, his mouth opening wider with each shout of laughter.

"Where do you think you are, Saxxon? Where do you think you really are? Do you think you're in some absurd alien spaceship?" He started laughing again but brought himself under control after a few harsh guffaws. "You should have stayed with the women, Saxxon. Spend your time playing with the women."

Saxxon's arms hung like dead flesh

and bone on his shoulders. "Where am I, Hunter?" He seemed unable to fill his lungs. The air felt dead in his chest. "What are you telling me? I want to hear it without any equivocation. *Where am I?*"

"You'll never know, Saxxon." He began laughing again. Saxxon whipped the beam of the zeta shear a hundred ways across Hunter's body, but he stood there unmoved except by the spasms of his own laughter. "You can't ever know, Saxxon!"

Clutching the zeta shear like a life preserver, Saxxon ran back through the chain of cabins. His mind was a maelstrom of fear and hatred and doubt where no thought could settle long enough for him to think it. The cabin where the two cartons had stood was now filled to overflowing with tall arching plants that dangled glossy green leaves over his head. There was barely enough room for him to run through the middle of them. He saw the change in the cabin, but it did not register.

The cabin where the women had awaited his presence was now a loud, glistening pump room. Unseen fluids pumped in a hundred directions, converged, diverged, and filled holding tanks till pressures rose to their optima and then swished away to some other part of the craft. Before Saxxon reached the end of the cabin, he slowed and stopped. The changes in the two cabins finally registered consciously.

So Hunter, he thought, was probably another construction provided by the alien. The alien, all things considered, wasn't too unlike the MAYA... At that thought, a chill of fear ran up the back of his neck and made his hair stand on end.

He sat down on one of the larger pipes and rested his arm on a valve. In the beginning, when he had been

taken into the MAYA, Hunter had given very little information about the working of the world Inside. The Insiders had, at first, argued, discussed, and had then forgotten about their conflicting ideas regarding whether the MAYA provided the landscape and events of the Inside, or if the Insiders themselves, in a sort of unconscious compromise, determined what happened around them. They had wanted the truth because, like human beings, they knew it was there — somewhere. Not that it would have done them any good aside from assuaging their curiosity.

But now, for Saxxon alone, the question was no longer academic: If the MAYA determined his landscape, then he could still be a prisoner and be, at the very moment he thought the thought, manipulated by Hunter. Although it would mean he had not escaped the MAYA, it would mean he still had a chance of avenging Isha's murder and the killing of 28 others — and there was a grim joy at even the slightest possibility he could one day open up Hunter to the world.

If, on the other hand, he himself, through his unconscious, determined his landscape — and if he were still in the MAYA — he was manipulating himself. Hunter would be far away, occupied with some other bureaucratic machination. And Saxxon would still be lying inside the MAYA, passing time with his private fantasies until whatever devices provided his nutrient fluids broke down and he died, like the others.

There was the chance — but it was looking slimmer every time he looked at it — that the alien was an alien, that it had rescued him, and that it was telling him the truth about Earth and itself.

Saxxon chuckled grimly to himself. Yes, he thought, and it can change

shape and function at will — from female to fuel pump in seconds. Oh yes, he thought, very likely.

The valve under the weight of his arm had deformed into a perfect armrest. He chuckled again, only not so grimly this time.

Saxxon walked back to the first cabin. The chair had apparently decided to keep out of the way by flattening and clinging to the bulkhead. When Saxxon stepped through the hatch, he saw it slide down off the wall, creep across the deck, and begin reforming itself in front of the viewpanel.

"I want to talk," Saxxon said. "I need to find out some things."

"Would you care to have a human shape to speak to," said the voice from the wall speaker, "or is this satisfactory?"

Saxxon decided to indulge himself. "A human — human-like speaker would be nice."

The hatch opposite the one he had taken popped open as though there had been some pressure behind it. Another gelatinous glob of the alien lifted itself over the threshold and dropped silently onto the deck. Saxxon involuntarily drew back his feet. The shapeless thing on the floor began its vertical elongation. When it had stretched to a meter and a half high, the arms began separating from the sides of the upper torso and the legs began to take shape. Most of the body was recognizable — but not the head. It was too large and shaped like a blunted arrowhead.

Saxxon watched its every shift of substance. The process itself nearly had him convinced that if he were in the MAYA, it was not his unconscious that was in control — never could he have dreamed up such a spectacle as he now watched.

The legs were the first to take on

the final shape. They were clearly a woman's legs. The gentle outward arcs of the thighs and calves could never belong to a man. The arms and upper body confirmed themselves. The woman's breasts were large and full and her long-fingered hands touched her sides and her stomach as though feeling for imperfections.

At last Saxxon understood the odd shape of the head. When the face took on its final configuration, he realized the vague triangular shape had resolved itself into hair, thick long hair. Its color flickered from pale brown to black and back to brown. Then it slowly lightened to a light straw-color. She was beautiful, and she stood in front of him, naked, like his own private Eve.

Everything but the wonder of it all flew out of his head.

"Hello," she said coyly. Somewhere below her — Saxxon wasn't looking at the floor — a slab of the alien rose up and made itself into a lounge for her. "Was there something you wanted to ask me?" she said through her smile.

He tried to concentrate on her face and ignore her nudity. He swallowed the knot in the back of his throat. "Yes. There was —" His concentration broke. She had shifted her weight in the chair and her breasts had gently swung over toward one side. He laughed aloud at himself.

He started over. "There was something I saw in one of the cabins. A man named Hunter. Why was he there? Did you put him there?"

"I'm sorry it upset you," she said, her face saddening. "Forgive me. I haven't had any prior experience with your type of sentient. I thought you would like to see him. You *did* want to see him."

"You heard me thinking that?"

She nodded and leaned more on

one arm. "When you tried to kill it, I had to deactivate your weapon. I wasn't sure I could seal the ruptures it would cause fast enough to keep you from suffocating."

"Air leakage," Saxxon said, filling in the thought.

"Yes."

"You reshaped yourself to be Hunter, based on the image in my mind."

"Yes."

"Entirely? No outside assistance or influence?"

She looked slightly puzzled. "I was Hunter, I was the women, I am this." She smiled again, as though proud of her present shape. "Was there anything else?"

Saxxon felt himself falling under her attraction. More and more his thoughts were leaning toward learning how her flesh would feel under his hands. There were other questions he wanted to ask. But her face — He could feel already the warmth of her out-curving thigh against him. She was not human, he kept telling himself. It was beginning to matter less and less.

"There was something else," he said. He hoped that that admission would carry him on to ask what he felt he must.

She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

He didn't know how to say it so it didn't sound like he was operating on square bearings. He decided to spit it out in its most succinct nakedness: "How do I know this is real?"

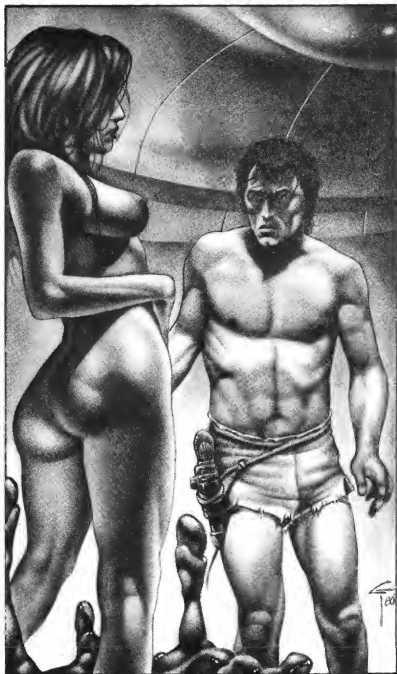
"It isn't," she said pleasantly.

He felt his jaw drop open.

"I thought you understood that," she said.

He felt his head shaking back and forth idiotically. "Am I inside the MAYA?"

"Oh no. You're getting very tense



about this. Let me change this room a little."

Saxxon was beyond being alarmed by the constantly shifting alien craft. The walls seemed to melt down to the deck and then begin a free-form vertical elevation. The deck under his feet became soft and brown. The viewpanel grew lumpy and green. Then he saw what the effect was — a forest. A broad segment of one of the bulkheads was becoming rough and thready like tree bark. Gradually he became aware of a growing rushing noise to his right. The hatchcover had become a waterfall — a wet, rushing waterfall with water as real as anything he had ever seen.

And before him, the woman indicated a woven straw mat on the ground. "Lie down," she crooned.

Saxxon gave himself up to the situation and lay full length on his side.

"Now," she said, "what was it you had on your mind?" She lay beside him, her head propped up on her arm.

"I'm having trouble remembering."

"Maybe I should change into some form not so distracting."

Saxxon imagined a hairy, large-muscled man lying in her place.

"Don't change," he said. "I'll remember." It was an effort. He sat up, hoping that from another angle she wouldn't appear so enticing.

"I asked you if this were real — and you said it wasn't. I'm afraid I might be — I don't want to be inside the MAYA. And if this isn't real — where am I?"

"You're worried about nothing," she said, pressing her hand once firmly on top of his. "When you entered the Gate, back inside the MAYA, you entered an area of distortion. We're on our way to your new Earth, where another of your kind is awaiting your arrival. Our space travel removes us from our point of departure, slides us through

the distortion, and deposits us at our destination. The area of distortion isn't between the two points. It isn't here or there. We aren't even sure it is. We do know that it elongates time. So while we're here, while we're nowhere, actually, I decided to amuse you."

"Then I'm not inside the MAYA."

She shook her head. "Not unless I am, too. And I have a memory that goes back some time before the manufacture of the MAYA."

"Yes, you mentioned that. It's just that I'm a little insecure when I'm taken out of one illusion and put in another. I would like very much to be able to feel real dirt under my feet and see real people in front of my eyes. I would like that very much."

She scooped up a handful of the rich black dirt and let it trickle out of the bottom of her fist. A smile spread across her lips. She leaned forward and brushed her lips across his.

"Tell me I'm an illusion," she said. She put her arms around his sides. "Tell me I'm not real." She kissed his neck and he could feel her tongue moving across his skin. "Tell me I'm not human," she whispered. Her hot breath rushed over his neck. "Tell me I'm not touching you."

"I have only one other question," he said into her hair.

"Ask me."

He whispered it into her ear.

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

Saxxon watched galaxies spin through the patternless beams of the alien craft and disappear in the immense distance. The woman was gone now — she was needed elsewhere she said, but the speaker on the bulkhead answered his questions in her voice.

"We're going between galaxies," Saxxon said. "Is there any reason we

couldn't go — or appear to go — through the middle of one?"

"We will enter an irregular spiral in two minutes."

"Just for me? I'm honored."

"You're only seeing what would be visible if we were to enter this particular spiral."

"I keep forgetting," Saxxon said. "We're not actually going to be inside the spiral."

"We aren't going to be anywhere. One minute."

"I just happened to think," Saxxon said. "When I came aboard, through the Gate, I don't remember seeing another one here on the ship. I thought if I went in one there and came out here, I'd see another Gate."

"You're more observant than I thought. You're still between Gates. You'll see the other one when you arrive on your new home. We're entering the outer dust lanes now."

Saxxon could tell something was happening on the screen. Portions of the sky were blurred away by irregular dark shapes. Then several stars streaked around the craft.

"Perhaps with your arrangement of eyes," the speaker said, "another configuration of the viewpanel would be more to your liking."

The panel elongated and curved into a semicircle around him. The remainder of the cabin went dark. Now the irregular galaxy seemed to surround him. On either side, as the craft entered the first thickly populated spiral arm, Saxxon saw what appeared to be a wall of stars come from behind his head and engulf them. The craft swam in a duststorm of stars. The closer ones had distinct coloration and shape. Then, quickly as it had begun, the ship passed out of the arm and into another dust lane.

"I never would have believed it," he said. It had taken away his breath and

it was hard to speak clearly. "It was beautiful . . . more beautiful than . . ."

They entered another star lane, this one far denser than the first one. He could only watch and say nothing. Never had he seen such splendor on any scale.

"If you would like, we could slow the image," said the voice behind him, sounding very far away, like an unconscious murmuring from the dark center of his mind.

"Yes," he murmured. "I'd like it slower."

The next dust lane was broad and thick and enclosed them in a cloud of black that thickened and thinned erratically. Then it glowed. The dust and gas that surrounded the craft glowed first grey and then a dull white and grew brighter and brighter until it stunned his eyes. Suddenly the obscuration was swept away, and Saxxon realized that instead of travelling with his eyes pointed to the rear, the alien had shifted the craft so that Saxxon could see ahead of them — and straight in their path was the hub of a galaxy, a flattened disk of stars so dense that it seemed to be no more than a lump of fog illuminated by city street lights.

But it was large. It was gigantic. It ridiculed Saxxon's ability to comprehend its size. The deeper they went into the center, the more compact the stars, the more white and blue-white became the dominant colors. Some of the stars passed overhead not in straight lines, but in pulled-out corkscrew patterns. Once he was able to see the cause — a dark companion body.

"There are planets here," Saxxon said aloud to himself. "I hadn't realized there would be."

"Many of them," said the voice from the now-invisible speaker module. "I'll show you."

The approach to the center of the galaxy slowed dramatically. Unmoving in the background hung a thousand stars, and behind that lay the immense elliptical cloud of the galactic nucleus. But nearer, larger than the background stars, one white sun hung motionless. Across from the left, a smooth dark shape eased onto the screen. It was utterly featureless — no clouds, no separation of continent and ocean — nothing but unblemished surface.

"Is that a dead star?" he asked the alien.

"It is a dead planet. Once there was a primitive life form that lived in its oceans. Now the planet is part of the Empire of the Plain."

The alien craft seemed to orbit the planet. It moved to show the other surfaces to Saxxon.

"I don't see any sign of ocean. Or of any life."

"The Empire of the Plain loathes all life forms but its own. They eliminate life and make any later habitation impossible. That is their way."

"Who are these people? *What* are they?"

"Given your particular range of senses, you would never be aware of their presence except by the result of their actions. You would probably assume that their actions were the result of natural, unguided, random forces. But they are, loosely speaking, conscious. They are not a unified species as I am. In that respect, they are more like you."

The planet swam out of range and the screen indicated that they were once again on their way through the heart of the galaxy.

"Are there many worlds like that one, smoothed over by the Empire?"

"This entire galaxy. Most of several thousand other galaxies."

Saxxon realized he was gripping

the chair arms with most of his strength. He tried to relax. "They're everywhere," he breathed. "My god, they must be everywhere. How near are they to Earth?"

"Not far — for them. But you need not worry. Earth has poisoned itself, hasn't it?"

"What about where you're taking me — how far are they from there?"

"Very close. But for some reason, their expansion seems to be away from that part of the universe."

Saxxon was not left at ease, but the spectacle before him now drowned out all other concerns. Second by second, the craft penetrated denser shells of the nucleus. Instead of passing so far from the stars that they were only points of light, they seemed to brush through the outer layers of glowing atmosphere. And the light that poured through the viewpanel began warming his cheeks. Thoughtfully, the alien dimmed the screen to a bearable level.

Saxxon suspected several times that the density could be no greater. The craft skimmed over glowing surfaces of stars, passed through the middle of them, and darted between tidal prominences. Saxxon expected to see the bulkheads redden from the heat, but he reminded himself, as the alien had reminded him, that this was a pageant for his eyes only, a scenario, a dream similar to reality that the alien had devised for his pleasure.

When the thought of the proximity of the stars could be no greater, the screen went white. Before he could ask for an explanation, the alien answered: "Here the stellar atmospheres merge. Now, we come to the center. It will not make sense to you."

"What do you mean?"

The alien didn't answer.

The screen went black. Either, Saxxon thought, the alien's cinematic

abilities have failed it, or some phenomenon he, Saxxon, wasn't familiar with caused the darkness. He was ready to shrug off the black screen when he realized that it wasn't exactly black. It wasn't exactly *anything*. He almost rose out of the chair to put his hand on the viewpanel when he saw something that made him decide better. Again, what he saw defied description — in fact, he wasn't sure that *saw* was the right word. Something had been on the viewpanel only for an eye-blink and he had sensed it some way other than with his eyes.

He decided later that when he decided to watch the screen very closely that he had made a mistake.

He focussed all his attention on the panel. At first there was nothing, as before. He thought he saw faint ghostly crescents swimming on the screen. When it happened, he couldn't guess, but suddenly something washed over him like a chilling wave. On the screen he saw *everything*. All at once, he saw everything he had ever seen in his life, like an incredible catalogue of objects from his life. This was only the prelude, like the listing of the cast of characters.

The drama itself lasted no more than a dozen seconds, and in that time, he saw all his life, all the lives of all the people he had ever known, and then all the stories of people to whom he'd spoken only a word or two. He saw the spiral wraiths of things that could never have lived on the Earth. There was more. There was more than any person could dream of in all the nights of his life. The viewpanel suddenly blazed white again. In minutes they passed into the region of separate stars. Saxxon had scarcely breathed the whole time.

"What was that?" he finally asked.

"That was the center of a galaxy."

"But *what* was it? Why did it do that

to me?"

For a moment the alien didn't answer. Then: "It was the center of a galaxy. It is a place unlike anything except itself. There is no way to talk about it."

"There seems to be a great deal in the universe you think is beyond my comprehension." His pride was beginning to ache.

Saxxon expected some retort, but none came. He understood that had he been dealing with a human being, there would have been some kind of reply, but he was not speaking to anything he had encountered before. Indeed, he was not speaking to anything he could even claim he understood very well at all.

"I apologize," he said. "My pride got in the way."

Again there was no response.

The craft moved swiftly through the veil-like arms of the galaxy and sped on into the vast emptiness between the islands of light.

"You are hungry," the voice said. "If you wish to eat, the adjoining cabin is stocked with food and company for you."

Saxxon was pleased. Until then he hadn't realized that the shakiness he felt could have been hunger. He rose from the seat and crossed to the hatch lock. Just before he turned it, he looked back toward the speaker module.

"I have a question before I eat. If everything here, this craft and everything else, is you, what exactly will I be eating?"

"Mr. Saxxon, in my peculiarly alien way, I am laughing right now. Bon appetit."

Never in his life had he smelled such smells. Back in Socalizona, his diet had been primarily hydroponics and vegetabroids and artificials like

Moolidrine and those dark, gummy Durlinas. Nothing like this had ever assailed his nostrils and presented such a feast for the eyes. He hardly noticed the company of the three women who one after the other offered him platters heaped high with thick slices of rose-tinted meats that dripped hot juices from their sides.

There were no utensils, so he held the food in his hands. When he bit into one of the steaks, he seemed to be able to taste the flavors all the way down his throat. Juice ran down his forearm and dripped off his elbow. As he ate the meat closer to the bone, it became tenderer and spicier.

Another of the women held a tray of white, round lumps of meat before him.

"What is this?" he asked.

"From the sea."

There were no bones in this, and it was sweet and even more tender than the darker meat. He ate seven of them, and with the edge taken off his hunger, he was able to pause long enough to survey the rest of the food heaped the length of the table.

Most of it was only dimly familiar — from pictures in books he had studied in Socializonan schools when he was a child. Some were delicacies he had eaten while living in the meadow. Red bulging tomatoes were stacked in pyramids, and beside them, on trays, tomatoes had been sliced and arranged in patterns and they looked wet enough to be made of water. Dishes of green cucumbers, pickles, and bowls of dark pungent sauces surrounded plates of white shrimp and lobster meat that lay steaming in puddles of yellow butter.

Saxxon ate with both hands, and when his eyes caught on something out of his reach, it was handed to him, and he scooped it up and smelled it and then put it in his mouth. He had

always eaten for sustenance, to keep up his strength for the struggle to stay alive, but now he ate for the sheer pleasure of it, for the sensation of cool, wet canteloup sliding down his throat, or for the texture of pineapple or pear between his teeth.

He ate blackberries slowly, popping them one by one in his mouth, letting the thick, sweet juice bathe his tongue. He was offered cheeses utterly unlike Socializonan cheese which was orange and sticky and made mostly of grease. These were yellow and white, and while several of them had tastes so subtle he almost had to listen for them, others seemed to explode on his tongue.

Saxxon listened to the food crunch in his mouth, he marvelled at the shapes of mushrooms and artichokes and asparagus, the smells of the meats seemed to be absorbed by his lungs and quickened his heartbeat, and the tastes and textures of one food after another made him realize that if he died there, at that moment, with his belly full to bursting, he would be able to forgive all those who had wronged him and die at peace. Never had he experienced the peace of complete satiation.

They handed him scented towels to wipe his hands. "I never thought I could eat so much," he said. "I didn't know food could be so . . . so much of a narcotic."

"You can sleep here," a woman said. "Sleep. We'll soon be at the Gate. Rest."

He lay back on pillows, his body aching from all he had stuffed into it. It was a hurt he willingly suffered. The last thing he heard was soft music.

Someone pulled at his shoulder. He slid his hand under his cheek and sighed deeply, still basking in the warm comfort of his full stomach.

Someone shook him again. He opened his eyes just a crack to see who it was.

The face was unfamiliar. It was a face something like his own, but it was softer looking, not female exactly, but not male either — epicene. Saxxon sat up. Everything about the figure was soft — the hair was little more than a brown wisp on its head, and the hand that had shaken him had long smooth female fingers.

"What are you?" Saxxon asked.

The alien ignored his question. "There is an emergency," he said without intonation. "I don't know yet how serious it is, but there is some danger."

"What is it?"

"We have been detected by scouts from the Empire of the Plain."

"What would they want of us?"

"When they find sources of energy, they try to harness them for themselves. If this is impossible, they destroy the source and dissipate the energy. As for living organisms — their desire is to eliminate all life forms except their own. We are not in danger yet. Fortunately, we are not far from the exit Gate." When the alien finished speaking, he stood blank-faced, staring at Saxxon, as though the life had drained out of his flesh. "They will try to destroy us."

"What are these 'people' who come from this Empire?"

"They will not register in your perceptions. Yet you will be able to detect their actions."

"Like when they kill me or rip away the hull of your ship."

"Precisely. You may watch in the next cabin."

Saxxon was not sure — not sure at all — that he wanted to see the approach of his own death. Nonetheless, he stepped through the hatch into the first room in which he had

found himself. On the viewpanel the stars passed overhead and converged at a vanishing point among the random girder-work of the alien craft. Nothing seemed amiss. Saxxon turned to the sexless figure.

"I don't understand this," he said. "You told me that this was illusion — that from the moment we passed through the Gate we were in a kind of fantasy-state. If this is fantasy, get us out of it! Bring us back into real space."

"Mr. Saxxon, of all people, you should know that some dreams are ironclad, and some can even be lethal. We are doing what we can to evade the enemy." Again, the life seemed to fade from his body. He stood staring at the viewpanel but his eyes focussed on nothing.

"What are you?" Saxxon asked suddenly. "You're different from the others. You don't seem —" Saxxon broke off, embarrassed at what he almost said.

"I don't seem as human as the others because I am still in the process of being shaped. I have not yet gathered all my information from the data banks of the craft. And there is something else. The other 'people' you have met on this craft —" He stopped suddenly, yet his expression changed in no way. "We are being assaulted now," he said passively.

Saxxon felt nothing nor heard anything different. Sweat began rolling down his sides. "What can we do?"

"I am doing what can be done. You may observe the damage there." He pointed at the viewpanel. Very slowly, a girder crumpled in its middle and swung about loosely, like an arm with a broken elbow. "As I was saying," the alien continued, his voice dull and flat, "the other 'people' you have met on this craft were drawn from your memories and desires. They were taken

from the perceptions you had of others."

"And you?"

"I am drawn from your perceptions of yourself. But I am incomplete. Because of this emergency there was not time enough to draw from you both those things you knew of yourself and those things in you that you were unaware of. There — you may see more damage. They are working their way closer to us."

This time, two beams broke off and floated over them, spinning lazily out of sight at the top of the viewpanel.

"All I can see is the ship coming apart. Why can't I see anything else?"

"As are all things you see here, understand that these images are translations —" (The screen flickered) "— from one level of perception to another." He nodded toward the screen.

Saxxon looked. His skin crawled. Yellow translucent slime covered the girders. Here and there, lumps of the gelatinous ooze gathered in one place — then the beam would snap off where the lump had somehow sheared it in two. As the stars passed overhead, reflections of their light glinted on the sliding shapes of the things that snapped away part after part of the craft.

Saxxon whirled on the figure beside him. "They're tearing apart the ship, and you said the ship is you, it's a part of your organism. How can you let that happen?"

"It happens. What more can I do than I'm doing? I am speeding us to the exit Gate as quickly as possible. I think, however, that there are several things you do not understand about me. I don't relish seeing parts of me destroyed. But this — here — is not all of me. I am elsewhere."

Another section of the ship separated from the main part and drifted

behind them, gradually falling further and further behind. The yellow ooze slid nearer the viewpanel.

"There is a hundred thousand times more of me elsewhere than you see here. Nonetheless, I do not take this destruction willingly. Besides, I have an obligation toward you." For the first time, Saxxon saw the alien, in his incarnation, smile. "I decided to take you off Earth, so it is my obligation to keep you alive and settle you on your new world. We are now separating from the main ship."

Saxxon felt the cabin lurch. The viewpanel showed the clutter of beams that made up the alien craft move to the side, and then, at a quickening pace, it grew smaller and fainter. He turned to the alien. "As simply as that, we leave it all behind?"

"Few things, you will find, are 'as simple as that.' We have a fair distance to go yet. The Empire will be happy with the main part of the ship, but they will search for us."

"How much of the ship is left?"

The alien smiled again, this time very faintly, and gestured at the two ends of the cabin.

"This? This is all there is left? We don't have much margin for error left, do we?"

"No, Mr. Saxxon, we don't."

"And yet — all this is illusion."

"Between one Gate and another, one cannot be said to 'exist' in the sense that one normally understands the word."

"So," Saxxon said, hoping at last to be getting some kind of understanding of his situation, "if we're in between, what is this Empire? Where do they exist? If they exist only in between . . ."

"An analogous situation, Mr. Saxxon, would be when you sleep. The dreams you have are often unpleasant and threatening."

"Yet they never hurt me," he said.

"That," said the alien with a trace of a smile about his lips, "is where the analogy breaks down. Believe me, the only good thing about the Empire of the Plain is that it only exists between intergalactic Gates. It has never left those confines."

"Could it?"

"I have learned through the ages spent in this universe that one may predict anything, and his prediction will not fail to come to pass."

"That's comforting," Saxxon said cynically.

"I have always found it so. I may predict my own death. But I also predict my rebirth. You will die and pass from existence."

Saxxon felt himself grow tense. More and more the thing in whose presence he stood was impressing him with his *otherness*.

"You will also live forever. Death, as you think of it, will evade you."

"That doesn't make any sense. Everything dies eventually — even you."

"That is true. But one doesn't necessarily remain dead. I have died several times." The alien suddenly turned his head to the viewpanel. "Excuse me," he said. "You may not wish to watch this."

Saxxon watched. The alien stepped to the bulkhead opposite the viewpanel and spread his arms and legs and pressed himself against the several hundred translucent rectangles. His flesh seemed to first become pliable, then it softened further and began to lose its human look. His cream-colored pants and jacket melted into his skin and it all became a flowing homogenous putty that spread out against the bulkhead and then, chameleon-like, began changing color to match the bulkhead he was pressing himself against. In a few

moments, he was gone, utterly absorbed into the ship, and Saxxon stood alone.

The viewpanel revealed nothing untoward. As before, galaxies shot from overhead and moved to a vanishing point. Something touched his arm. He spun, his face suddenly pale from the fright — and faced the alien again.

"I did not mean to frighten you, but we must hurry. We have been detected again. We are very near the Gate, but unfortunately, the force of the Empire is very near us."

"I don't see anything," Saxxon said, pointing to the screen.

"They are eating through the opposite side of the ship. You are no more than two meters from them."

"They're on the ship?"

"Very much so. I expect we will lose pressurization in less than forty-five seconds," he said flatly, not a trace of emotion in his voice.

"Forty —"

"Lie down," he said to Saxxon. He pointed to the deck. "Now."

Saxxon did as he was told.

"I want you to understand: I will do my utmost to get you through the exit Gate."

"But we may not be able to get there?"

"That's correct. Lie still. I think you might like to close your eyes."

Obstinately, Saxxon kept them open. And again, the alien began deforming. This time his color was dark — black, as near as Saxxon could tell. He spread into a thin ribbed panel, and like a sheet for the dead, he fell light as a feather over Saxxon. He instinctively raised his hands to hold it away from him — but then, deciding that his trust in the alien was all he had left besides his fragile life, he lowered them to his sides. No thing touched his face and he was thankful for that, but now, he realized, he was entirely

enclosed, encapsulated. He heard an explosive hiss somewhere very near his head, and then there was nothing — no sensation of weight, no pressure of acceleration, no noticeable heat or cold.

A face-sized transparency happened in front of his eyes. Unlike when he was in the ship, he now faced the direction of movement, and far ahead of him, at the point from which the streaking galaxies radiated, there was a brilliant white point of light. That, he decided, had to be their destination.

It did not take long. Saxxon guessed that it would take only minutes for him and his "ship," the alien, to reach it. Their speed increased radically, and the void around him filled with the glowing streaks of passing galaxies.

Something moved at the corner of the transparent panel. Something yellow. Saxxon's breath came in short gasps. Like a yellow stain, the thing crept across the panel, smearing the light of the galaxies into yellow smudges.

Saxxon felt himself begin to smother. The thing grew thicker over the faceplate until he could see nothing.

"Now," he thought, "now I am going to die. I am going to die somewhere that doesn't exist, somewhere in between."

Yellow brilliant light poured into his face. Behind the thing that clung to the faceplate there was a light so bright that it burned his face. He covered his eyes with his hands. And then the noise began. It did not begin softly and build to a frenzied crescendo — it blasted full-bore into his ears and vibrated every cell in his body until he thought he would disintegrate.

When the incredible din stopped,

and it stopped as quickly as a bursting bubble, Saxxon realized he had been screaming. He caught his breath and opened his eyes. There was blue overhead, and coursing across it, a single seagull rode on unmoving wings.

SAXXON RAISED himself up and leaned on his elbows. The long curving shoreline of some deep-blue sea stretched far away before him. More gulls circled lazily overhead. On the shore, past the wide expanse of sand, rose a green chaos of jungle. Beyond the green, blue mountains swooped up toward the sky, steep as parabolas.

"You aren't dead," a voice said.

Saxxon turned his head sharply. It was his epicene companion. He sat with his knees drawn up to his chest, as though he had been waiting a long time for Saxxon to rouse himself.

"This is where we were bound? It looks like . . . tri-vids of the old days on Earth . . . like pictures I saw in school. Where are the cities?"

"There aren't any cities. There is no one else here but you and the other human."

"Where is he?"

"Nearby, I would guess. Our entry made a certain amount of commotion."

A kaleidoscope of horrors rushed through Saxxon's imagination.

"That thing . . . that attacked the ship and then the cabin . . . You formed a capsule for me out of your own body."

The alien nodded. "We were very close to the Gate. When we entered this area, we left it behind us. It can't exist here yet."

"Yet?"

The alien's expression betrayed no ulterior meaning: "As I told you, I have learned to never say 'never'."

"You aren't making me feel any more secure."

He shrugged. "Security is an illusion."

"We aren't in the MAYA and we aren't 'in between' Gates," Saxxon said. "Then I'm here, now in the flesh."

The alien smiled. Saxxon stood up and knocked the sand out of his clothes. "I'm here now," he murmured to himself. A grin spread across his face. "I'm here now. I really am." He surveyed the beach. "Do you like the world?"

"I do. I really do. I'd like an empty desert if I were really there. Is the whole world like this?"

"No, there are nine small continents. I modified each one in a slightly different way. It will give you something to explore when the new of this wears off. By the way, here's your weapon." He held out the zeta shear.

Saxxon hadn't missed it. He didn't know when he had lost it. He reached for it but held his fingers just above its butt. "Will I need it here? Is there anything dangerous on this world?"

"Only small animals and insects. None of which have any interest in you."

He withdrew his hand. "Then I won't need it."

"It's yours." The alien pointed to several rocks up the beach that protruded from the sand. "I'll leave it there. You can get it when you want it."

"Why would I ever need it if there are only I and the other human? I'm going to look for him." The alien stood up. Sand in the creases of his clothes fell away in veil-like patterns.

"What are you going to do?" Saxxon asked him. "Are you going to leave now?"

"No, I thought I would stay here a while." He smiled vaguely. "I would

like to know you better."

"Be my guest." Saxxon strode off across the beach toward the line of green trees and bushes. With every step, the words jettied through his head, "*Here, now!*" He watched his feet — real feet — walking through real sand on a real beach where birds soared and wind blew warmly across the waves.

"What else could I have?" he said aloud. "I have it all! I have everything I could ever want! I'm here. I'm here now!"

"So am I," came a soft voice.

He looked up from the sand. "My name is Plurra. They told me there'd be someone else coming soon." She was beautiful.

"I thought you would be a man..."

"I'm not," she said. "I don't think they know males and females apart. You just got here?"

He nodded. He couldn't take his eyes off her. About her thighs she had fastened a length of coarsely woven fabric. That was all she wore. She was beautiful. Her eyes were blue like chips of the cloudy sea, and together with her lips, her face became an open picture of the many flickering emotions that streamed through her. She was coy and skeptical and sly and anxious and knowing and all other things as quick as a twitch of her lips or the raising of an eyebrow or the lowering of an eyelid. Her secrets could be read on her face, but they were complex, so complex, that Saxxon knew right there, right then, that it would take a lifetime overcramped with days to even begin to know her.

"I said, you must have just got here?"

He nodded again. "Yes." Finally his words would come through his voice. "We did. Me and — I don't know his name. The alien. Part of the same

'person' who brought you here."

"Two of them brought me here," she said, faintly puzzled.

"Two of them picked me up too. But then I found out that the both of them were really only one person. And that that 'person' could be many people at once, or could be a space ship, or anything. He's —" Saxxon scanned the beach. "He's over there. By those rocks." He turned back to her and said without pausing: "I've never seen anyone like you before. Your eyes . . ."

She did not try to hide from the compliment. Her eyes met his directly. "I'm sure you've been through a lot. We're both lucky to be here. They said you had been in the MAYA. They told me about it."

"You're from Earth. I have trouble remembering that. Are you from Socalizona?"

"Yes, I am. This is a nice change isn't it?"

Saxxon lifted his head to the sky. In his lifetime he had never seen such blue in the heavens. "It is a nice change," he said. Gulls whirled over his head. "It is, it is."

"And they say it's ours," she said.

When he looked at her again, he realized that tears were rolling down his cheeks. "Show me around," he said.

She took his hand and they walked toward the forest. Behind them, sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin beside four sea-set rocks, the alien watched them with half-closed eyes.

The sun had turned him brown. Only where his short loin-cloth covered him was his skin pale. Plurra had shown him how a certain kind of fibrous leaves could be laid out and beaten together and then let dry in the sun — it made a coarse kind of cloth

that could be stitched together.

Together they had made a lanai, a kind of open-air building where the low walls stood only as high as their waists. Sometimes they wished to be out of the afternoon rains. There, under the lanai, as the rain rustled in the palm branches they had spread across the roof, Saxxon and Plurra lay on mats of tangled moss, eating pieces of green melon he had found in the forest. She had found grapes and seven orange-colored pear-shaped fruits.

"Does all this seem real to you?" he asked.

Her face revealed a flow of emotions. "It's the world we left behind us that doesn't seem real to me. Is something bothering you?"

"No," he smiled. The orange fruit was slick and sweet in his mouth and heavy with water. He placed his hand on the swell of her hips. "After being deluded in the MAYA for so long, and after living in Socalizona, I'm suspicious of anything that's too good."

"Sometimes you're suspicious of me. You ask me where I've been and what I've been doing."

"I'm sorry. Sometimes it seems that you and the alien have plotted together to make me happy."

She grinned at him and pulled herself closer to him. "Why would we want to do that?" Her mouth touched his neck and she gently nipped his skin. "You think I'm a shifty conspirator?" She nuzzled him around his ear. "It's true," she said breathily in his hair. "We're conspiring to make you the happiest man in this sector of the universe." He was laughing now. Her leg moved between his. "We call the project Ecstasy-BITE."

"Bite?" he said between laughing.

Plurra pushed him over on his back

and bit him lightly on his cheek. "It stands for Best In The Entire Universe."

"That doesn't stand for —"

Her hands moved over his body. "Our plot starts any second now." Her mouth was cool and sweet-tasting. "You should feel it beginning now."

Her hair smelled like outside and rain. Something inside him began to take shape. He held her soft waist within his hands. Something inside him began.

"Now," she said.

For the two of them, time did not pass. Every day was filled by beaches that stretched to the limits of sight, by ocean-worn cliffs, the rushing sigh of endless waves, and by the lavish clutter of the jungle and all cool and colored things it contained. Afternoon rains cooled the hot blue sky and at the first drops, steam would rise from the beach sand. On the palm fronds of the lanai, the rain sounded like the sweeping of a brush. With evening came a breath of cool air from the jungle, and Saxxon and Plurra would eat the fruits they had gathered from the trees. Saxxon's nights were filled with Plurra's face — her pale, pale eyes, and her lips, and the way her hair spread across the pressed moss mats. His nights were filled with her face and night birds and the sighing of the waves and the pale of the two phaseless moons that drifted across the sky.

Always somewhere inconspicuous, whether strolling among the trees or sitting crouched beside some cluster of rocks, the alien always watched them. His eyes were dim and half-closed, and in the weeks that Saxxon was aware of his presence, neither a word passed his lips nor an expression crossed his face. After a time, Saxxon no longer saw the thin figure.

The clothes of the alien, always as fresh and neat as the day they arrived, had caught Saxxon's wonder for a few days, but then he let it go and his attention focussed again entirely on Plurra. His eyes never wandered from her movements, his thoughts never gave his love for her any competition.

One day they walked far into the jungle and decided, after spending the night beside a hot spring, to ascend a peak that they had seen many times when looking north from their lanai. It was not the highest mountain near them, but it would give them a view of their surroundings without exhausting them with the climb.

They had stopped beside a spring that poured out of a rock when Plurra asked, "Why does he always follow us?"

"Who?"

"The alien. You haven't noticed him, have you?"

"I knew he had been watching us, but . . . I guess I just stopped noticing him. Is he following us?"

"I heard him behind us a little while ago. It doesn't bother me." She dipped her hands in the water and drank.

"He said he wanted to learn about humans. I don't know exactly what he meant by that."

She leaned back against a smooth-barked tree-fern and pulled one knee up against her chest. "Something else has been bothering me," Plurra said. "When they brought me here, my trip was a lot like yours. They explained how they could make things appear and disappear at will. But I don't understand about the attack on you by the Empire of the Plain."

"What about it?"

"If it was an illusion to pass the time for you and to let you know something about him, whoever he is,

why didn't he just terminate the illusion and eliminate the threat? Maybe the Empire thing is just another pretense?"

Saxxon shook his head. "I don't know. I can't answer that. It's starting to sound too much like life in the MAYA, where everything was a figment of a mechanical imagination." He let his head fall back on his shoulders and looked up at the clear sky. "I'm willing to accept what he tells me. He's given me you, and he's given me the longest peace I've known in my entire life. If he came out of those bushes right now and told me that this was all over, that he was going to vaporize me — I wouldn't like it, I'd try to stop him, but I'd have to admit that he hadn't given me a short deal. Just for getting me out of that god damned MAYA I'm willing to give him my trust."

"Did he get you out?" She didn't look at him when she asked this. She looked at her hand and the V-shaped ripples the flowing stream made around her fingers. "Did he?"

"Of course he did. Look out there." Through the foliage, they could see the ocean as blue as her eyes and the arc of the horizon. "Is that pretense, illusion? How could it be?" He took her wrist with his hand. "I don't want to think about it, Plurra. The possibility that . . . if I were still in the MAYA . . . Or if this were some kind of scenery created by the alien just to make us happy . . ."

"Talk to him," she said. "When we get back and you feel like it, talk to him."

He nodded. "I don't want to, but I will." He stood up suddenly. "Want to go on now?"

She smiled beautifully and said she did. "Let's spend the night at the summit," she said. "I want to see stars all around me."

From the peak, the jungle lay before them like a carpet of green. On the opposite side from the ocean, a double chain of peaks trailed into the distance. Beyond that was the vague purple of undefined mountains. Together they pulled back the low, overhanging branches of the small trees and bushes so they would be able to see the sky over their heads at night. The flaming globe of the sun drifted below the horizon not long after they arrived, and then they sat on the gathered moss mat to await the coming of the stars. Within an hour of setting, the sky had lost its color.

"Do you think these are the same stars we saw from Earth?" she asked, drawing closer to him for warmth.

"If what I saw from the viewpanel of the alien craft was any honest reflection of reality, no. These are all different stars. We're the only humans to have seen them, probably."

"Then they don't have any names. There aren't any constellations."

"They would have names if you named them," he said.

"Me? Name them?" She laughed and rocked against his shoulder.

"Why not? Name the brightest ones. Name them after friends or just make up sounds."

She tilted her head back and studied them a moment. Saxxon admired her profile, her fine chin and the straight line of her nose. He never tired of looking at her.

She pointed to a bright, blue-white star — the brightest one in the sky.

"That one," she said, "I name Isha."

Saxxon pressed his lips together. Sitting with Plurra and thinking of Isha caused him to feel a heaviness tighten around his forehead.

"I thought you might like it that way," she murmured.

He nodded. "Thank you."

She pointed to a different part of

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the sky, to a noticeable yellow star. "That one is Aspa."

"What, or who, is Aspa?" he said, still trying to shake the heaviness out of his thoughts.

"That's Aspa," she said, pointing. "It's just a sound. And over there is Barro." With rising excitement, she gripped his upper arm a little tighter. "That one, just above the horizon, I christen...Crissen." He could see she was grinning. She turned her face toward his leaned forward, her hair brushing lightly across his cheek. She kissed his lips. "Help me think of names," she coaxed. "Think of one that begins with D."

As the hours passed and new stars rose out of the east, they went through the alphabet and then started over again, going back over the already-named stars to re-enforce their recollection.

The twin moons had risen high in the night sky when they finally lay back on the moss mats they had gathered and let themselves pass quietly into sleep.

"Mr. Saxxon."

His eyes flicked open. Instantly he was awake and adrenaline coursed through his brain and body. The sky was grey with dawn. He sat up and looked around. He saw no one.

"Mr. Saxxon," the voice said. It was not the alien speaking, of that he was sure. He stood up, trying not to awaken Plurr, who lay curled up with her cheek resting on the back of one hand. Still he could see no one.

"There is no need to answer, Mr. Saxxon. I am perfectly aware of what you are thinking. No, you are not hallucinating. You don't recognize my voice? Hunter, Mr. Saxxon. I am Hunter."

"How did you get here?" Saxxon said under his breath. He looked into each surrounding bush with great

care as he spoke. If Hunter were there . . .

"You misunderstand the situation, Mr. Saxxon. You assume you are somewhere. How do you know you are anywhere, Mr. Saxxon?"

"What are you trying to tell me, that I'm in the MAYA? I'm not. I'm sure of that. Just tell me how you found me, how you got here." Saxxon could barely contain himself. He felt madness creeping up from the base of his spine, like an open-mouthed snake rising to strike at his brain and poison his sanity.

"First you tell me you're immune to the truth, and then you ask me a string of questions." His voice, sounding from some point exactly between Saxxon's ears, was dryly sarcastic. "Then I shall construct an elaborate lie for you, my friend. You were rescued from the MAYA by two aliens with the same personality, and they whisked you by an illusion of space, pretending to rescue you from some non-existent threat they haphazardly named the Empire of the Plain. When you arrived on this uncharted paradise, who was waiting for you but the most beautiful, most attractive —"

"Stop it! Stop!" Saxxon felt the bare-fanged viper reaching nearer and nearer his center of reasoning. "I know where I am, Hunter. You can't shake that out of me."

"I'm glad, Mr. Saxxon, that your convictions are so firm. The strongest beliefs change most frequently and most violently — that's what's so interesting about them."

Saxxon pushed the dense foliage aside as he plunged headlong down the mountain slope. He wanted to be away from Plurra and be free to scream at this thing that inhabited his head against his will.

"Hunter, get out of me, get away

from me!" He ran into a skein of tightly meshed vines. It gave with his weight and several loose vines hanging in overhead branches dropped across him. He thrashed violently, sure that in the dark he had been cleverly trapped by Hunter. "Let me go! Let me have my life!"

"Mr. Saxxon, I do let you go and I do let you have your life. You are free to wander the circuits of the MAYA as long as you wish"

"I am not in the MAYA!" Saxxon yanked and ripped at the tangled vines. "The MAYA was abandoned." The adrenaline still poured into his blood, but his muscles suddenly signaled him that they were no longer able to respond. Their strength had been spent. He felt like an infant trying to tear loose bonds made of steel cable. "The MAYA is empty," he said weakly. "Everyone died in it except me — and I alone escaped."

"A handy illusion, Mr. Saxxon."

"It isn't an illusion," he said, his words barely audible to himself. "This is real."

"In point of fact, Mr. Saxxon, you can never be sure, can you? Reality is simply the dominant illusion of the moment. The MAYA is infinitely variable in the landscapes it can provide for its inhabitants. For all I know, I myself may be drifting through the microcircuits of larger MAYA — and everything I think of as real is only the construction of my secret desires working together with my conscious wishes and the mechanical decisions of a machine unknown to me. I can never know where I am or what I am, Mr. Saxxon, so how can you? How can you ever know for sure?"

Saxxon's body seemed to have lost all sensibility. Only his mind was capable of any action. "Why do you torment me?" his mind said. "What

do you want of me?"

"My intention is not to torment you. I am simply intruding momentarily on your private landscape to see how you are doing. I'm checking your mental health, in other words." Saxxon thought he detected a grin behind the words. "And what do I want of you? The use of your unused organic circuits. They have been extraordinarily helpful."

"The MAYA was abandoned, you told me." The words drifted slowly out of Saxxon's mind. He seemed to have little control over them.

"And so it was. And so the new government thinks it has been. But it wasn't abandoned for long. You I kept alive and operative. Thanks to you, I have moved quickly up through the ranks of the hierarchy. You are very useful to me. You couldn't know how accurate your predictions are — and especially how I take note of your doubts concerning certain bureaucratic matters. You are a Class One Doubter, Mr. Saxxon. I take you very seriously when word comes out of the MAYA that an arrangement or an outcome is doubtful."

"Then, I'm still Inside," Saxxon thought hopelessly.

"Most assuredly."

"I will never get out."

"You will never know, Mr. Saxxon, you will never know."

Saxxon closed his eyes and let his consciousness collapse on itself and fall into darkness. His brief vacation into happiness was over. Overhead, the whitening sky was turning to blue. But that was of no significance. His world was as black as the inside of the MAYA where he was now sure he lay, floating in gently circulating nutritive fluids. If dying would have helped, he would have thrown himself off some high rock — but even dying, now, would be illusory. Like someone had

snapped a switch, everything inside him became wordless, thoughtless, and quiet.

"Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes. The brilliant sky blinded him. He clenched them tight shut. "Where am I? No, forget I asked that." Saxxon pulled himself up to a sitting position. Plurra sat on her knees beside him.

"You are all right"

"Yes." He looked around him. He had been lying not two meters from the mats they'd prepared the evening before. "You found me here?"

"Yes. I woke up maybe ten minutes ago. I lay there a few minutes and then came over here to waken you — but you seemed like you were unconscious. You finally came around, but very slowly. How do you feel? It wasn't something we gathered and ate last night, was it?"

"No, none of that. I just had bad dreams." He shook his head. "No, it wasn't a dream. It was an awakening. I had a very bad awakening."

Her face expressed curiosity, wonder, and anxiety, one quickly following the other. "I'm not sure what you mean, but I think you dreamed about being on the Inside, in the MAYA."

"Exactly. Only now I have new information," he said flatly. "I am now, here, inside the MAYA. I never got out of it. Hunter is still using me — only this time it isn't for anything good. He's using me to advance himself in the government, the Deocracy, whatever he means by that." He stood up. "I'm Inside. And all this — " (He waved his arm at the sky and the jungle and the ocean that spread out before them to the end of their world.) " — is . . . decoration. A set. A platform where I can act out my fantasies. Like being rescued by that

absurd alien." He held his head in his hands and let his legs fold up beneath him. He fell into a limp sitting position. "My god, my god. I'm as helpless as I was in the beginning. Still manipulated." He looked up at her. "It isn't much different from how it was on the Outside. All of us were manipulated there in a dozen different ways. Only there we had some chance of escaping, even if it was only into the desert areas or into another state. But here . . ."

"If you are Inside, what does that make me?" She looked at him evenly, no discernible expression on her face.

"I don't know. You may be another inhabitant. You may be . . ."

"A figment of your desire?"

He nodded.

"Don't believe it. But then, you can never know, can you?" She briskly turned and walked down the slope in the direction of their lanai. In seconds she was hidden by the lush foliage, and within half a minute, he could no longer hear the whisking noises of her passage through the wide drooping tropical leaves. He stood alone at the mountain top. But no more alone, he thought, than he had been in his happiest moments with Plurra.

More and more, as he sat there, he became convinced that he hadn't a hope of ever getting out of the MAYA. Not a prayer.

Later in the day, when the sun approached its zenith, Saxxon finally got to his feet and wandered aimlessly down the mountain, in a direction that would take him away from Plurra and the lanai they had built by the edge of the sea.

As he descended the peak, he caught glimpses of the jungle spreading away to the edge of the horizon, like a sea of green. Once, when stopping for a few minutes of rest, Saxxon heard a noise behind

him. Someone followed him. The alien, he thought. It did not concern him. He idly wondered if by some force of will he could make the alien vanish. He didn't bother trying. Nothing mattered to him any longer. He would walk and walk, eat when he had to, sleep when he could do nothing else, and die, he hoped, sooner rather than later.

Saxxon staggered into a clearing and was halfway across it before he looked up. Expressionless as usual, the alien stood there, barring his way.

Saxxon tried to walk around him, but the alien swiftly moved to block him. "Move!" Saxxon commanded. The alien's half-closed eyes never deviated from their stare. "Out of my way!" He struck at the alien and his fist sunk harmlessly into its body. There was not the slightest resistance to his hand. Saxxon stepped back and tried to move away in a different direction. In an eye's blink, the alien had moved again to block his passage.

"What do you want of me?" Saxxon hissed. "What can a shadow want of a human being?"

"I want you to sit. I want you to listen."

"What are you? You're something I dreamed up."

"Listen. There is a problem. Something very dangerous is starting to happen."

"Perhaps it will kill us all. If only that would happen."

"I don't think Plurra would agree with you. Am I to understand that you're giving up?"

Saxxon propped his fists on his hips. "Yes, I'm giving up. Hunter manipulates me like a coin in his fingers. I give up."

"I thought you might," the alien said tonelessly. "After I came to know you better and saw your reaction to

Plurra, I saw this as a possibility."

"You're admitting that the trip here was a farce? That I never got out of the MAYA?"

"Mr. Saxxon, I do not feel at all like a part of your dreams. I want to assure you of that. To my knowledge, the MAYA is far, far away from us. Unfortunately, the Empire of the Plain is not so far away. They are setting up a Gate very near here. When it will become operational, I can't tell. It will be soon, and then I'm afraid this world will not be safe to inhabit."

Saxxon was staring at the ground now, still trying to assimilate the alien's earlier remark that to his knowledge, the MAYA was far away . . . But then what of Hunter? Where had he come from? A very realistic and very bad dream?

The alien started to speak: "Are you still — " but Saxxon held up a hand to interrupt him.

"I need to think. Wait. Let me sit and think." In the small clearing in the middle of a vast, continent-wide jungle, he carefully sat down and loosely folded his legs beneath him. The alien moved a few paces away from him and also sat.

The alien's remark that the MAYA was very far away had not given Saxxon a spark of hope. For a second he had seen it as the fulfillment of his most sincere desire — to be Outside — but a second's thought and he cast the hope aside.

The day he had been taken inside the MAYA was the day his life had begun its pendulum swings between joy and the lowest despair. What had been beautiful in the meadow had turned to death and horror. Hunter, the man who had been the moving force that had taken him out of the poisoned world of Socalizona, had abandoned him and the others for reasons of political expediency. The

trip with the alien had been filled with wonder at first, and then . . . Now here, this world, a paradise complete with an Eve, had been poisoned by Hunter — either by the man himself or by the dream of the man . . . and with that, the accompanying knowledge that this too, this world, was only another part of the MAYA. Every joy had been destroyed as soon as he had come to appreciate its beauty. And now, the “alien” was telling him, there was a threat from the Empire of the Plain, of which Saxxon knew next to nothing.

He sat in the clearing and seemed not to even breathe. His eyes, half-closed, saw nothing of his surroundings. He rarely blinked, rarely swallowed, and his respiration was imperceptible. Around him, the broad, drooping leaves of the jungle foliage began to rustle with the momentary breezes that now passed gently over it. Clouds gathered overhead in preparation for the afternoon rain. Saxxon did not sense any of this. Inside him, his thoughts were a silent vortex where scenes of peace and violence alternated with great rapidity. Threats, words of love, implied dangers, stated hopes, and secret fears all whirled together, and gradually, very gradually, a pattern and a realization formed out of all the emotional colors that had swept from one corner of his mind to the other.

Saxxon became aware, then, of how his body ached from being immobile so long. It had rained, he realized, but his clothes by now were nearly dry. He stretched his arms out and behind him as he bent forward, enjoying the firm pull exerted on his back’s muscles. Together, he and the alien stood up. Saxxon shook out the slow blood in his legs.

“I have decided,” he said to the alien. “I know now what I should do.”

“You are not giving up,” the other said, intoning the words so that they were neither question nor statement.

“No, I am not giving up. Before I sat down and thought . . .” Saxxon chuckled. “It wasn’t thought even. Not really. I’m not sure what I was doing. Now that I think about it, I’m not sure I was *there* all the time.”

“You will help me with the Empire then.”

“Whatever’s needed. Let’s start back. We can get there by early morning.”

They headed off, skirting the base of the mountain. The ground was relatively even and with the light given at night by the two small moons — faint as it was — they hoped not to have to stop before arriving at the edge of the ocean.

“The trouble I was having,” Saxxon said to the alien as they picked their way through an especially dense growth of orange-fruited trees, “was with all the ambiguity. Whether I’m Inside or Outside is in question. And with that comes the problem of you and Plurra and the Empire of the Plain . . . If I’m Inside, then all of you are constructions of my unconscious working with the MAYA. But how can I know that? Like Hunter said, I’ll never know. So wherever I looked, there was ambiguity. I could be sure of nothing.”

They stopped a moment to catch their breath. “You lead,” the alien said. “I’m beginning to tire.” Saxxon led the way.

“The other trouble I had was with disappointment. Every time I found something beautiful or peaceful, I laid my life around it and let all things depend on it. And all those things dissolved, one by one. Then there lay Saxxon. Half his soul an emptiness. Disappointed one more time with the way things fall. Then you overloaded

my circuits with this threat of invasion by the Empire."

"I am sorry Mr. Saxxon. I thought you should know."

"Knowing was probably what kicked me over the edge. One more blow to the fragile structure I called my life. I thought I shouldn't have to live with perpetual ambiguity and repeated disappointment. I just *shouldn't*. But where is that written?" Saxxon's arms were dull with aching from pushing vines out of their way and pulling branches aside — nonetheless, he felt himself grinning, truly happy at the answer to his last question: It wasn't written anywhere. The way his life had run, ever since he was a child, should have clued him to the possibility that the more wonderful, the more beautiful, a thing is, the less likely it is to stay that way. And ambiguity? What else was there? Why had it taken him so long to learn a thing so simple?

"I've been misled," he said to the alien. "The bottom line is that I'm going to help you however you want because it will be more interesting than sitting idle. When that's over, I'm going to work at finding out if I'm still in the MAYA. But I'm not going to worry about it — I'm going to *work* at it. Same as with the Empire."

"I am glad you will help me." The alien was breathing hard through his words.

"Do you want to rest for a while?"

"Yes. I will be able to go further if I rest now."

The ground sloped gently under their feet, for they were just on the edge of the mountain Saxxon and Plurra had climbed nearly two days before. They sat, now, their backs resting against small, smooth-barked trees. Before them, through the tops of the jungle trees, they could see distant mountains that rose gently at

first and then rose more and more steeply until the mountain sides near the peak were virtually vertical.

"Look," Saxxon said pointing. "The moons are rising."

First one broke through the thin wisps of cloud that clung to the steep peak. Then close behind it, the second one appeared. They were just large enough to be discernible as disks, but against the black sky, they were brilliant beyond their size. Fine strands of cloud passed across their faces, silhouetting the mountain's sides and the thin layer of foliage that covered it. Somewhere not far from Saxxon, a night bird warbled a high tinkling sound.

Saxxon smiled. "Who could begrudge *that* its lack of reality. Looking at it now, distinctions of that kind don't seem very worthwhile."

"I have never thought so."

"You didn't? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wouldn't have done anything other than harden your desire to see things the way you always had."

Something flew through the branches above them.

"Probably right. Are you ready?"

The alien stood up. "Yes. I will need to rest periodically."

They pushed on through the forest. Where the two mountains rolled one against the other, a small stream wound among dark glistening volcanic rocks. When they stopped, they stopped by its banks and drank its cool water.

For all the nights Saxxon had spent on the planet, he had never heard the birds that he heard this night. The trees seemed to be filled with them. Some shrilled a warning to others, some sang only to hear themselves. Saxxon thought of himself. Earlier he would not have heard the birds at all, he would have been so self-absorbed

with warning himself of dangers and troubles he imagined himself faced with. Now, he would be more like the second kind of bird — he would act for the sake of the action. He would aim himself at getting back to Socalizona, but he would concern himself with what he had to do to get there — and those things he had to do, he would do well. If he got to Socalizona, he got to Socalizona. If he didn't, he would know he had done well at trying to get there.

The first order of business was the Empire of the Plain. The alien had said that Saxxon could help him. How he could do that, Saxxon hadn't any idea, but he didn't worry about it. The alien would tell him when it was necessary. Himself and the alien against something called the Empire of the Plain! He laughed to himself — it didn't seem as if they had much of a chance, just the two of them.

At the first greying of the sky, they came in view of the ocean. They were close enough so they could see gulls circling the beach. Saxxon took the lead and increased his speed. He wanted to see Plurra very badly.

He did not have to wait long. She stood where the stream spread wide and crossed the beach. She came splashing across the shallow water.

"I heard the birds," she said. "They made so much noise. And when it got louder and nearer, I thought it was probably you."

He opened his arms to catch her and then closed them around her, pressing her cool body right against him. She smelled fresh and sweet and her hair held the odor of leaves.

"Something happened to you," she said, trying to pull back enough to look him in the face. "What is it?" Something good happened to you."

"I missed you," he said, ignoring her questions. "Forget everything

you've learned about me. I'm somebody else now."

"What has happened to you?" she said, feigning suspicion.

"I got tired of carrying around a lot of outdated luggage. I was a dinosaur."

"A dinosaur?" she laughed.

"Didn't you hear me bellowing up there on the mountain?"

"I did," she agreed. She laughed again and then pressed her head to his chest. "I heard you bellowing very loudly. It scared me."

"Dinosaurs do that kind of thing all the time. After two or three good frights, people usually stay away from them."

"I didn't want to stay away from you," she said softly.

"I won't stay far from you, ever." He kissed her lips, her cheek and her lips again. "I don't have many opinions left," he murmured in her hair. "One that I have concerns you." He kissed her again.

The edge of the ocean shimmered gold and then brilliant orange. Morning sunlight spilled across the surface of the water and dabbed the oceanside trees with spots of orange.

"Come to the lanai," she said. "There is something I want to tell you."

When they stepped into the cool morning shadows of the low-walled building, he said, "What is it? What was so important?"

She told him without speaking a word. She was eloquent on the subject.

He awakened in the middle of the day. Next to the moss mat on which he lay, Plurra had left a large seashell filled with several colors of fruit. Beside the seashell stood a dried gourd full of spring water. When he drank from it he realized she had

flavored it with the juice from a tart green fruit they had discovered together a few days earlier.

As he drank a second time, he realized the alien was sitting crouched in the corner of the lanai. He had never been there before. His eyes were half-closed, as they usually seemed to be, giving him the appearance of perpetual tiredness.

"Would you like some of this?"

Saxxon said, nodding to the fruit and water.

"Thank you. I don't eat."

"Tell me about the Empire."

The alien sat like a carved, primitive piece of woodworking. His voice was soft and without inflection. Only his lips moved when he spoke. "There is little to say about it. It is not a place that is inhabited by persons of any species. If it seems so, it is only that the force of the Empire has decided to take on the guise for its purposes. The Empire is a realm inhabited by a single force. It has no mind, as you think of mind. It does not reason, it has no cunning, it is not subtle. I know that you think of me as the 'alien' because I am different from you. The force of the Empire is so strange that it does not even fit your sense of the word if you can call it 'alien.' "

"I saw it," Saxxon said, "when I was aboard your starship. It was yellow. And shapeless."

"It was I who gave it that shape and color. As with all other things on that voyage, I gave shape to things which had no shape. I allowed you to see things while we were 'in between' which were actually happening, but were not happening in that particular form."

"I think I follow you," Saxxon said. "So when the Empire appears here, what can I expect? Will they be visible, invisible? And how do we stop them. Not them, *it*, I mean," he said,

correcting himself.

"You may well not see anything out of the ordinary. If that is the case, you will definitely be aware of the presence of the Empire by its activities. Anything mechanical will be attacked first. Living things next. When nothing lives, the Empire planet is level, monogenous, and utterly without blemish. That is why it is called the Empire of the Plain.

Saxxon finished the last piece of fruit in the shell — its white inside reflected bands of blue and coral and yellow. Over the alien's shoulder he saw Plurra coming up the beach carrying a large melon in her hands. She looked out to sea once, and the wind blew her hair behind her like a veil.

"You're implying then that the Empire could appear in some kind of physical body." Saxxon said, turning his attention back to the alien. "That's a possibility?"

"It is. The force could appear as anything. Something very large or something so small that it would not be detectable with your senses."

Saxxon nodded. "And you and I are going to prevent this?"

Plurra stepped up a step into the lanai. She put the melon in a corner out of the way. "Prevent what, the Empire?"

The alien sat still unmoving. "It is unlikely that we can prevent the Empire from coming here. If we can't we can make provision for going elsewhere."

"How am I supposed to help you?" Saxxon asked.

"Since we came to this place, I have been in a weakened condition. There is so little of my substance left that it is difficult for me to function as I am accustomed."

"Everything else — the ship, all the material you said was you — all that was destroyed by the Empire?"

The alien nodded almost imperceptibly. "Yes. This is all that's left. There is more of me elsewhere in this universe and in others. But until I can rejoin myself; or until I can get your help, I am incapable of any concerted effort. Maintaining a life support system alone requires a large part of my substance. I have reduced the mobility mechanisms to their minimum."

"That's why any exertion tires you so fast," Plurra said.

"Yes. Mr. Saxxon, you asked how you could help. I have observed you for some time now, and I do not think when I present my proposal to you that you will react favorably. What I'm going to suggest is basically repugnant to your nature."

"Try me."

"I want to invade your body. I want you to supply the life support and mobility and in conjunction with your powers of mind, I will operate and direct you."

Plurra's lips moved in a silent "My God . . ."

"What happens to me? Saxxon asked "I mean, my thoughts, my will, me?"

"They will work with me. I will supplant nothing."

Saxxon took a deep breath. "How could you do this and when do we start?"

"I know little of your inner structure. I need to know more before I inhabit you. Otherwise, it could be unbearably painful for you. Your nervous system is a complete mystery to me."

"How are you going to find out all this?" Plurra asked in a low, hesitating voice.

"If you will allow me now, Mr. Saxxon, I will deposit on your back a small portion of my substance. It will gradually feed into your system,

discover what I need to know, and then reform in one place where I can retrieve it and assimilate the information."

The alien stood up while he spoke this. Before he had finished the final words. Saxxon had turned where he sat, offering his back.

"Put it on me," he said with a grin. "Is there anything I should or should not do?"

It felt like a hand pressing lightly just below his left shoulder. When the alien moved back to his corner, the hand still seemed to be touching him.

"What does it look like?" he asked Plurra.

"A piece of clay. It changed color a little to match your skin."

"It will soon disappear," the alien said quietly. "And there is something else you should do. I weigh about seventy kilos. You will have to carry that much extra weight. You should become stronger. You will be a larger person."

"How long do I have?"

"You should work quickly."

Saxxon found long slender logs which he placed across his shoulders, and then he did knee-bends. His legs, he thought, would require the most development. When he exercised them till the muscles quivered just from the strain of keeping him on his feet, he would run. He ran along the beach to develop his utilization of oxygen and to toughen his endurance. A dozen days passed before he sensed a change in his body — until then there had been no progress, only exhaustion and aching. Then, on the thirtieth day, his body seemed to respond with an ease and fluidity of motion that was completely unexpected. The knee-bends went easily and when he ran, he passed his return marker before he had started to breathe hard. Following that day, his

progress grew in jumps.

Plurra massaged those muscles that were sometimes almost too tender to touch. She became the sole food-gatherer, and if she suspected he could practice longer or run further than he was, she would laughingly threaten to withhold his food.

The alien waited. He did not come into the lanai. Rather, he was often seen near the protruding boulders that rose up out of the beach. His eyes slitted, he sat buddha-like, waiting.

On the twenty-third day, Saxxon felt something on the underside of his arm. It itched like a bite and there was a slight swelling. He had been running at the time, and by the time he got back, it had grown to pebble-size. He was ready to panic, suspecting all manner of pathological causes, but when he saw the alien waiting for him, he knew what it was, hanging there on his arm.

Without a word, the alien took his hand and turned his arm so the growth would show. "You're taking it back now?" Saxxon asked.

"Yes." He picked it off with his hand. It came away as easily as if it had not been attached in any way. Saxxon watched the lump dissolve into the alien's flesh. In only seconds it had disappeared.

"Mr. Saxxon, we may proceed at any time."

"Is there time for me to . . . have a little time with Plurra first?"

"I understand your hesitation."

"A little time then?"

"No, Mr. Saxxon. That is impossible. The Empire has found us."

SAXXON AND the alien did not talk as they went back to the lanai. Saxxon could feel the granular quality of the hot sand as it moved under his feet. He had never noticed that before. The alien staggered once and

Saxxon easily caught him.

"You're all right?"

"Assimilating the new information takes some of my concentration away. I have never grown accustomed to walking through sand. I am no weaker than usual."

They walked out of the sand and onto the hard ground.

"You said once that you don't eat," Saxxon recalled. "How do you live? Where does your energy come from?"

"The air."

Saxxon nodded. Any further questions on the subject would elicit answers he knew he wouldn't understand.

They entered the lanai.

"Lie down," the alien said.

Plurra stepped in the back entrance. "What're you doing?"

"Time has come for him to . . . do whatever he's going to do." Saxxon lay on his back.

"Mr. Saxxon, I would recommend you close your eyes. Although this process is quite natural to me, it may make you uneasy. You will have to remain here for the next thirty-six hours while I reshape myself inside you. It takes that long. Any sudden movement prior to that could be harmful."

"Fatal?" Saxxon asked.

"For both of us."

"Is there anything I should do?" Plurra asked.

"He will need to eat. For the next several days, he will need great quantities of food."

"I'll see to that," she said.

"Mr. Saxxon, what the lump I placed on your back did, I will do. Once in you, I will begin rebuilding you to accommodate the weight and the extra nervous capacity."

"What about this extra nervous capacity?" Plurra said. "What does that mean?"

"It means that when I finish with you," the alien said, looking straight at Saxxon, "you will have a body seventy kilos heavier — twenty kilos of muscle and other bodily construction and fifty kilos of brain in various strategic parts of your person."

"Fifty kilos of —" He couldn't grasp the thought.

"You will find things quite different," the alien said.

Saxxon lay quietly as instructed, but he decided he would look. It was unpleasant-looking, but it did not hurt. The alien, first, laid his arm on one of Saxxon's legs. The arm seemed to become very elastic, it stretched a dozen centimeters longer than its normal length. The alien took hold of the shoulder of the elongated arm and squeezed it off at the joint, as though it was made of putty. The arm lost its shape and melted undramatically into Saxxon's flesh.

The alien took a moment to seat himself carefully near Saxxon's side. With his remaining arm, he squeezed off parts of one leg and then the other and placed the lumps of flesh-like material at different places on Saxxon's body. Twenty minutes or so later, Saxxon began to feel a heaviness across his chest. He did not know if it was merely the weight of additional flesh or if he was beginning to be unnerved by the process.

The alien had reduced himself to a one-armed, legless torso, and he gazed sleepily a moment at Saxxon. "I think," he said softly, "that you should close your eyes now. It would not be good for you to move suddenly."

Saxxon agreed. He realized, when he shut his eyes, that he was frightened. He trusted the alien — but he was frightened.

"You will feel some heaviness on your chest. Breathe deeply and regularly. It will disappear in a few min-

utes."

There was a heaviness all right. He kept his eyes shut, but he suspected the main weight of the alien's trunk was being placed square over his breastbone. Breathing was difficult, but the effort kept his mind occupied and pushed out the fear.

When he opened his eyes, he was alone with Plurra. With great effort, he turned his neck and glimpsed her with his peripheral vision. She was staring at him, her lips slightly parted.

"Alone at last," Saxxon said.

She moved quickly to his side and stared at his chest. He tried to lift his head, but it seemed heavy, very heavy. He experimented and found that his arms and legs were similarly weighted down.

"This is . . . unbelievable," she said. "He's dissolving into you. Your body is smooth and puffy-looking."

"I'd like some water," Saxxon said, a sudden thirst coming on him.

"I'll get it."

That was only the beginning. Saxxon felt his body calling for food and water continually. Though the strain and exhaustion soon began to show in Plurra's face, and he apologized for his needs, she kept the water containers full and gathered more fruit and a few vegetables when he rested.

"How am I looking now?" he asked that evening.

"The puffiness seems to have subsided a little. Does that mean he's . . ."

"He's integrating himself," he said, finishing her thought. "My joints all feel odd. Every once in a while there'll be a twinge of pain, but then it's blocked. I can tell he's cutting off the pain as soon as it begins." He chuckled. "I think he's telling me to tell you to feed me."

She held the food to his lips and he took it between his teeth. "Does he talk to you?"

He shook his head. "I just keep getting very definite feelings about what I should be doing. More food, please."

"Sorry," she said with a grin. "Growing boys and all that."

He kissed her fingertips when she fed him. This time he ate everything she had gathered. "He's telling me to sleep," he said. "It's like a drug filling up my . . . my . . ." His head turned slightly to one side as his eyes closed.

Plurra hurried away to gather what she could find that he might eat later. The day's light had faded when she returned. She lay herself beside him and eventually slept lightly, waiting, even in her sleep, for him to need her.

Dawn was breaking over the ocean when Saxxon awakened. He noticed immediately that he felt different — lighter. Not as he did when his body belonged to him alone, but not weighted down as he had the night before. Plurra opened her eyes and sat up, rubbing them.

"What do I look like today?" he asked her, his voice still rough with sleep.

She looked at him — then looked at him again — then rubbed her eyes once more and looked a third time.

"What is it?"

She seemed to ignore him. She put one hand on his chest and moved it across him. "My God . . . she murmured.

"Plurra, what's happened to me?"

She glanced quickly from his head to his feet. "You must be a full two meters long." She laughed. "I mean high. And I've never seen a more beautiful body in my life."

"Me?"

"He's redone everything about you. Your muscles are larger, and your chest is . . ." She grinned. "... massive." She sat back and gazed approvingly at him.

"You're embarrassing me."



"You know what," she said, cocking her head to one side. "We can't have any privacy anymore."

"The price of having a beautiful body," Saxxon said.

"How do you feel inside? Can you tell he's in there with you?"

"No. Other than feeling big, I feel just the same. I think I need meat."

"What?"

"Probably the tissue build-up. I think I'm going to have to eat meat. Fish."

"I don't know how to catch them," sahe said, looking troubled.

"Don't worry. I think something is telling me that once I get back on my feet that won't be a problem. Thirsty." It hit him again — a sudden dryness in his throat and stomach.

She held the cup to his lips.

At noon he knew he had to stand up — but slowly. Plurra held his arm. At last, he was able to look at himself. Everything about him was massive. Muscles bulged everywhere he looked. The thin layer of fat he had had over his body had been taken away — utilized somehow in making him what he now was. But strong as he looked, his legs were rubbery and his coordination was barely good enough to get him out of the lanai without knocking out one of the support posts. He walked like an arthritic, unsure from step to step if his aching joints and muscles were going to withstand the stress he put on them and not tear one from the other.

"Help me across the sand to the water," he said. His chest heaved, trying to pump enough air through his lungs.

"Is he telling you to do this?"

"I don't know. I just feel like I have to stand at the edge of the water."

Twice he nearly went down in the sand, taking her with him. At last they stood at the edge of the water.

"He's doing something. I can't tell what it is, but — Look." He pointed at the incoming wave. It was swarming with fish. They washed up at their feet, flopping and slapping the wet sand. Plurra gathered the larger ones, tossing them further up on the beach.

"That was an interesting trick," she said, rinsing her hands in the water. "Are you going to help me with these or do I have to figure out how to skin and bake them by myself?" A smile came to her lips but she pressed it back.

"Strong man will help. I'm getting a feeling again that there won't be any problems."

There weren't. In a way he didn't understand, when he held the fish, the slightest movement of his fingers was like the cut of a scalpel. Within minutes, the dozen fish were filleted.

"What about cooking them?"

Saxxon picked one up in his fingers and looked at it carefully. Then he put it in his mouth, chewed and swallowed it.

Plurra stared open-mouthed as he downed one after another. Without thinking, she anticipated his thirst and handed him the water container. He drank it to the bottom.

"I have to lie down again," he said. "He probably has designs for that protein."

When Saxxon next stood up, he discovered that he no longer hurt in every muscle and joint. His body seemed to have the strength it needed to carry itself, but his coordination was somewhat erratic.

He walked and jogged along the beach in the late evening to familiarize himself with his new person. A kind of glow came over him as he ran through the thin foaming sheets of water. Small, long-legged birds scattered to give him passage. He ran toward the west, toward the orange sky and the black water, and realized that it was here he had been happiest — with his

love for Plurra, and it was here, now that he felt, for the first time in his recollection, a kind of bursting sense of well-being, of security with being inside the package of flesh and bone and blood that he inhabited. He ran faster. His body worked flawlessly.

"Mr. Saxxon."

He nearly fell trying to stop. No one was behind him or anywhere near him. Then he realized it was the voice of the alien. It had come time for them to speak directly.

"Mr. Saxxon, this is only the preliminary step. The greater step is yet to come. Our bodies have been joined. It is now time to connect the important parts."

Water lapped around his feet. "What should I do?"

"Run, Mr. Saxxon. Run back to the lanai. Concentrate on your running. I will open myself gradually. The Empire of the Plain is setting up its Gate. We have only hours left."

Saxxon ran. He watched the ground several meters in front of his feet and concentrated on coordinating his breathing to his stride. Then something happened. He knew and he felt what the alien was. He had had a sense of largeness with his new body, but now he understood what immenseness felt like. Across this universe and several others he was connected to something whose substance would equal the mass of uncountable galaxies. His head began to swim. He forced his mind back to the wave-stained sand compacting under his feet.

Saxxon saw where the alien was holding back. The thing he was connected to was nearly all *mind*. And access to this was blocked. Saxxon was thankful.

The beach took on a different coloring. The sea, when he glanced at it, was not the same either. Nor was the jungle foliage. He saw the sweep of currents in the ocean, and he could

identify warmer and cooler spots in the trees with his eyes. And there was something else — he realized that this sense was unnecessary: all he needed to do was look toward an object — a lapping wave or a gull feather or an expanse of sand — and all that was knowable about that thing filled up his mind. When he glanced up at the sky, he saw one of the brighter stars twinkling — and he knew that there inside him, arrayed like a banquet of incredible proportions, all the things that could be known about that star were spread out for his examination.

"I don't want to see Plurra like that," he said to himself, to the alien.

There was no response, but he knew it would be so.

As he neared the lanai, a new perception, unlike any other he had felt became accessible to him. A window opened in a new quarter of his mind and he saw a sort of thinness hanging here and there in midair — it wasn't a thinness of atmosphere, but a thinness of . . .

He concentrated on his running and his breathing until the lightheadedness subsided. When it did, the alien turned on the perception again, this time more forcefully.

He ran through pockets of space where it seemed as though his existence became tenuous, where his being seemed less assured. These places hung in the air like transparent clouds of uneasiness. He began veering away from them and skirting their edges. They seemed to seep toward him when he came near, as though they were directed by some kind of consciousness. When Saxxon looked across the beach and up into the jungle, he realized these things were everywhere. They did not seem dangerous, but proximity to them caused a kind of sickness to enter his physical body, and something in his perceptions told him that whatever they were, they were growing

stronger moment by moment.

Saxxon ploughed his feet into the sand and came to a dead stop. Water curled up his ankles and washed back, pulling sand around his feet.

So this, he thought, is it. This is what we were waiting for. Saxxon realized that he was facing the gathering forces of the Empire of the Plain.

He ran up the steps of the lanai. Plurra looked up from the tray of fruit, she was eating from. "What's the matter? You look surprised."

"I feel like I have a god inside me."

"He talked to you?"

"More than that — he showed me things. He opened up doors of perception that animals like ourselves have never dreamed of."

"You look worried by it. What happened?"

"I saw what he talking about — the Empire. It's here."

"Where?"

He waved his hand at the beach, wondering how he could explain what he had sensed. "They're weak still. But they're here."

"What are you going to do?"

Saxxon felt a tenseness building up in his shoulders and neck. "He hasn't let me know anything about that."

"Sit."

Saxxon looked behind him, knowing in the instant that he turned that the voice came from within him. He sat down. Plurra looked at him with curiosity lining her eyes.

"Mr. Saxxon, you must relax now. You must let me have full use of your mind."

"I'm afraid of your powers. I'm afraid of losing myself," he said inside himself.

"When this is over, you will realize how absurd that fear is. Relax, pull back from your mind."

"What are you doing?" This time it was Plurra speaking.

"He's doing something," Saxxon said weakly, his words slurring.

"Relax, Mr. Saxxon."

Saxxon felt something calming bathing his brain. Undoubtedly the alien was manipulating his endocrine system along with everything else. He found himself in a state of quiet alertness, willing to relinquish whatever parts of himself the alien desired.

Like a passenger in a high-powered vehicle, Saxxon found himself literally knocked backwards by the force of the alien's mind. There was no modesty here, no holding back or apologies for the raw power Saxxon felt moving inside him.

A sentient wave of power, like an expanding bubble, radiated outward from Saxxon's chest. It passed through the walls of the lanai, across the solid ground and into the jungle in one direction and onto the beach in the other — and it met resistance on all sides. It had met the force of the Empire. The alien pushed outward with a reserve of power that seemed far in excess of what Saxxon thought he had held back. When those irregular globules of the Empire had been pushed back a hundred and fifty meters, something else began.

Like a humming in the pit of his stomach, Saxxon felt a different kind of presence in him. Then all his thoughts snapped off. The alien moved into his mind. Like a swift drawing of delicate lace, the alien established himself. Again, no apologies, no gentleness, just quick efficient action.

Had Saxxon been able to think and put words to his thoughts, he would have said that it felt like a great twisting funnel of cold bubbling water jetting out of his forehead and emptying into the space there in the lanai right in front of him.

Saxxon lost all sense of his own presence. The passage of time had as much significance for him as did the floating patterns of free protons in the core of his planet's sun. He never for a

second was unaware of where he was or of the torrent of energy that flowed out of him or of the forces of the Empire pushing harder every moment on the outer edges of the bubble of security that encompassed them, but all the same, another part of him seemed to wander freely in the vast halls of the alien's memory. Like a museum opened for the casual perusal of whoever inhabited the same body as the alien, Saxxon drifted past memories of archaic worlds, uninhabited worlds, and worlds so filled with activity that their atmospheres hummed. More than half the memories made no sense to him. They were of things he could not comprehend being done to other things of which he had no knowledge. And there was the one memory of some great collapse where things — living things — of such capacity and ability as to awe even the alien himself had congregated, had joined together in one organism and had died willingly. Saxxon hovered in awe over his recollection. There was a grandeur there, and such an incomprehensible intelligence . . .

Saxxon was snatched away from those wonders.

"Water," he heard himself saying.

A moment later, Plurra held a wet-lipped cup to his mouth. The water soothed a dry place somewhere deep within him.

It was day. The orange light of earliest sunrise lit the sands of the beach. The pouring sensation was no longer there, but in his chest he could still feel the collected concentration of the alien as he maintained the protective enclosure around them.

"You're back," Plurra said. She was sitting on her knees directly in front of him. "Look what you did." She pointed behind her at the shimmering rectangle that hung in midair: the alien had created another Gate. Saxxon stared at it, not believing for a moment what he saw.

"I didn't know," he said. "I think I need something to eat."

As she put the small pieces of variously colored fruit to his lips, she told him what she had done that night while he had sat there. "I got up to stretch my legs and walk around a little. It was beautiful the way the ocean, for a little while, was so smooth it reflected the stars. I went down to the surf, but then something odd happened. As I was crossing the beach, I fell over a piece of driftwood — but it was so high up on the beach and it wasn't there yesterday evening. When I got to the water's edge, a little wind blew and it froze to the bone." She put one tray down and picked up another one. "I felt all . . . sick inside like I was catching something. Vertigo and nausea. So I came back here to lie down. And as soon as I got back here, I felt fine."

"Don't leave the lanai," he said. "Stay here."

"I thought sure I was going to be sick for days. Can you get up?"

His body responded perfectly, although it had not moved for more than ten hours.

"Something else happened that I noticed just before you . . ." She took his arm. "What were you doing? Were you awake all the time?"

He didn't know how to answer her. "The alien had control. I was awake, but I wasn't there, if that makes any sense."

"Anyway," she said, "look up there."

She pointed to the rise of the terrain on the jungle side of the lanai.

Where there was yesterday a wide, mountain-ascending sweep of green and darker green, there was pale green and yellow that melted into darker brown. Some killing blight had swept over the jungle during the night and had burned wide blotches of dying yellow and dead brown across the dense green.

"And listen," she whispered.

"I heard it," he said. "Nothing but the surf. The birds are gone."

She took his other arm with her other hand and looked up into his face. "Is this part of the Empire now?"

"It will be soon," his voice said — but it was not his words that it spoke. The alien was talking now for both of them to hear. "We are leaving this place. It belongs to the Empire."

Saxxon forced his thoughts into his tongue and lips: "Why should we leave? Why don't we resist? I know from what I've learned from you that you are greater than the Empire. You could destroy it in a moment." The alien's presence moved back into the recesses. Saxxon's words came easily now: "Your attitude toward the Empire is that it's like a . . . a child, which you could change if only you wanted to. So why do we run? The Empire is a sickness."

"I promise you, you will know. But now, we must leave before all my power is expended."

"If what he says is right, you have enough power to . . ." Plurra searched for words. ". . . enough power to protect us and get that thing off the planet. Why won't you?"

"We must go now," Saxxon heard himself repeating.

"Why?" Plurra said.

"Because you will both otherwise die."

"You're convincing when you want to be. Do I just step through it? You first."

Saxxon didn't know if he or the alien were controlling his legs, but he walked up to the shimmering Gate and reached behind him for Plurra's hand. He stepped through and pulled her after him.

HIS FEET stepped into hard, pebbly sand. For a moment he thought they were on a different part of the world they had just left — but the alien's mind told him otherwise.

His eyes focussed on the landscape. It was much like the brush band that surrounded the Socializoma megalopolis, except that here the brush was not so high or so thick and here and there there were touches of pale green. Unlike the brush band, where all growth had been poisoned by industrial dumping, this was an area where the soil was pure and nourished by water only once in a great while. The waist-high scrub stretched endlessly in all directions to the horizon.

"Back on Earth," Plurra said, "I saw something like this on the tri-vid. What do we do now?"

"This way," he said, taking her hand. "There is something in this direction."

The alien's mind interpreted what his senses perceived. There was a faint heat source just beyond the horizon. When Saxxon's eyes scanned the dense scrub in front of them, he saw the life that hid camouflaged within the prickly foliage and underground in the dense mesh of tangled roots. He sensed the presence of two quiescent vipers within a radius of a hundred meters. Saxxon and Plurra threaded their way across the desert floor, their course a zigzag between dangers.

"Where are we?" Saxxon asked the alien within him.

"Here." Saxxon understood that for the alien, this was a complete answer. In his mind floated a picture of the position of this world in the universe, but in the moment Saxxon tried to understand it, he realized that there were also patterns of universes, and that this was not necessarily the universe in which he had originated. He appreciated the complexity and let it go.

The shimmering Gate disappeared in the distance behind them as the bloated orange sun rose above the horizon, coloring the faint green a

muddy red. In front of them spread uninterrupted desert, their shadows lengthened ahead of them like some dark, disembodied aspect of themselves.

The tallest spires of the city rose over the horizon, colored a deep red in the sunlight.

"That's where we're going?" Plurra said, awestruck.

"There is something . . . someone living there," Saxxon said, speaking the alien's knowledge. "Someone old."

They pushed on through stiff scratching scrub, Saxxon altering their course from moment to moment to skirt the territorial radii of the desert animals. All the while, the rose-colored spires lifted higher above the rim of plain they walked across. The structure was not made of stone — it was something more akin to stainless steel, and the spires that rose far into the sky were utterly without ornament. The only deviation from their sleek vertical sides was where the tip rounded to a hemispherical top.

As they came closer, and could see the upper portion of the main construction, Plurra said, "It's all one building — it looks like a city."

Saxxon sensed a quietness about it. There was life there, but it operated on a very restricted basis. And whatever lived there was benevolent.

He asked the alien about the Empire of the Plain — He asked how safe they were from it. As an answer, a chill ran up his back and made the back of his neck tingle.

"We should hurry," he said to Plurra, picking up the pace. The thick red sun rose very slowly. When it reached its zenith it seemed as though they had been walking for more than a day. Plurra's arms were scratched and bleeding from the rough drag of the scrub across her skin. Sweat ran around the edges of her face.

The castle towered over them so high it seemed lean away from the vertical, threatening to topple on them. The walls, like the spires, were unadorned. No decoration, no window, no receiving devices of any kind broke the clean metal surface of the structure. And straight in front of them as they emerged from the desert vegetation was one entryway. It stood open wide.

Plurra hung close to him. The passageway was of the same material as the rest of the castle, a smooth reflective metal, and it arched several meters over their heads. Their footsteps echoed over and over until their walking produced a clatter that resembled some mechanically produced noise.

"Does he know where he's going?" Plurra said over the reverberating echoes.

"Right up ahead," Saxxon said, responding to the information the alien was continuously feeding him.

The passageway made a ninety degree turn, and Saxxon knew that just around it he would see what was living in this place. He felt the alien's mind beginning to work inside him — it was a cool sensation around his lower ribs. They turned the corner.

"A new phase begins!" the young man said excitedly. He wore a loose-fitting garment of yellow and black geometric patterns.

Plurra stared at the man and then looked to Saxxon. "Does the alien know who he is?"

Saxxon struggled to absorb all the information the alien had just released into his mind.

"Yes, he knows all about him."

"Good, good!" the young man said. "Then we don't have to waste time on introduction. Come this way. You're tired and hungry. I have just what you need." The man walked lightly away, leading them through several passageways and finally into a room

unlike any they had seen so far in the castle: the walls were lined with warm wood and the furniture looked so comfortable after their trek through the desert that it seemed to beckon them to recline and relax.

"Who is he?" Plurra whispered.

"He is a Gamesman. His race is scattered across this universe and they do nothing but pit themselves against each other and against other races in contests that last thousands . . . hundreds of thousands of years."

"And longer," the young man said, nodding his blond head. "This game, in your measurement, has lasted now 700,200 years. And with your arrival, a new phase begins."

"Why are you so human-looking, so young, and how do you speak our language?"

"He isn't human," Saxxon answered, putting into words what the alien had fed into his thoughts. "He only looks that way because the alien is rearranging what we see. He says we would be repelled."

"He would probably be correct," the young man said, handing each of them a separate tray of familiar-looking foods. "He is not tampering with my perceptions, and I tell you frankly, that if I were as repulsive to you as you are to me, you probably would not stay to appreciate my hospitality. But —" (He waved his hand as though he were dismissing his thoughts), "— I am accustomed to odd, uncomfortable, and ugly-looking aliens." He sat across from them now. "I imagine you understand my language through your alien's assistance. He is inside you?"

Saxxon nodded and swallowed the food in his mouth. "Have you met his kind before?"

The young man waved his hands. "Of course, of course. They're all over this part of the universe." He leaned forward and spoke in a softer tone, as though confiding in Saxxon. "Don't worry though, they're

harmless." He leaned back "I wouldn't want to have to carry one around like you do, but as long as your physique can handle the stress . . ." He threw his hands in the air again.

"You're referring to the alien as though there's a population of them," Plurra said. "He's told us there is only one of him."

The young man shrugged and laced his fingers behind his head. "They say that. I don't entirely believe them, do you?"

"Yes," Saxxon said. "I believe him. I've felt the . . . the unity of his existence."

The man raised his eyebrows and twitched his head to one side. "Well, perhaps." He stood up suddenly. "Make yourselves comfortable while I'm gone. I'll be back in several hours. The Game, you know." His eyes sparkled as though there were lights behind him.

"What Game —" Plurra began, but the man had already vanished through a doorway and, the door was closing with a soft hiss of escaping air.

"He seems a little crazy. Does the alien know what kind of Game is going on here?"

"He says it's the only game there is."

"What does that mean?"

"He isn't answering. He told me earlier that each member of the Gamesmen plays a game his entire life, and that all the games together will constitute the grand game of their species."

"Has he said how long one of them lives?"

"Until his individual game is over."

"Enlightening," she said, clearly not satisfied.

"That's all I know."

"Are you tired?"

Saxxon nodded. "Even with his restructuring me, I'm not used to carrying all this extra weight." As he said the words, he felt the warm

chemistry of sleep flow across his brain. The solidity of the room seemed for a second to weaken, and then he fell in to sleep.

"Awake and arise!" The Gamesman fluttered around the room shouting and waving his arms. "Awaken ye who sleep your lives away! The new phase has begun!"

Saxxon stared at the young man across the room, his eyes finally focussing.

"Up! Up! We have visitors. You must see them. Come with me!"

Saxxon had never seen such excitement. The room seemed to be filled with electricity. Plurra was on her feet, and together they hurried after the Gamesman.

He led them down several passageways, all of the same reflective untarnished metal, and finally to an empty shaft. "Just step into it," he said.

Saxxon hesitated — the shaft dropped down to a black nothingness, and he did not dare lean far enough into it to see what was above.

"Come, come!" the Gamesman said, stepping into the empty air of the shaft. His feet dropped a few centimeters, as though he were standing on a cushion that gave a little under his weight. Then he began a rapid ascent. "Hurry!" he called down, his voice fading.

Saxxon took Plurra's hand and stepped into the air. Though they could see nothing under them, their weight seemed to rest on their feet — until the ascent began, and then they felt weightless.

In less than a minute they were at the top of one of the spires and the Gamesman stood at a transparent panel studying the horizon.

"Look! he said gleefully. "Someone who is after you."

Ranged across a wide portion of the horizon was what seemed to be an

army of grey. They were still far away and Saxxon couldn't make out many details, but there was what looked to be hundreds of transport vehicles, dozens of outriders in small hovercraft who zipped erratically around the front edge of the movement, and over them, a swarm of slow-moving aircraft, some not large enough for more than one human-sized person, others huge enough to enclose seven or eight of the transports that rolled across the pale green scrub of the desert.

"What in hell is that?" Saxxon said under his breath.

The alien, who had been strangely silent for so long answered him crisply: "It is the massed force of the Empire of the Plain."

"They followed us," he said aloud.

Plurra turned suddenly, her eyes wide. "The Empire?" she asked.

"Yes! Yes!" the young man said gleefully. "The Empire of the Plain is what your alien calls them but to the Gamesman they are the Pieces!"

"My god," Plurra said, "he's crazy." For a moment her sense of wonder overcame her fear of what was marching over the horizon.

"You're all pieces," the Gamesman said. "Even your elegant, oh so intelligent alien is a Piece. One either plays the Game or one is played by the Game." He turned eagerly back to the spectacle on the floor of the desert.

"We're in danger here," Plurra said. "Ask your alien to set up a Gate. They'll be here in half an hour!"

The alien had already answered. "There is not yet enough strength in me to bridge the gap between this place and another. Be patient."

"Look!" the Gamesman said, pointing up, almost directly above them. "It's one of their little scoutcraft and I can see the tiny red face of one of the Pieces looking down at us."

"He's mad," Saxxon said to the

alien. "This is no game — they'll kill us all, the first thing."

"We have to get out of here." Plurra said, her eyes darkening with fear.

"We can't. The alien said to wait, to be patient." Saxxon gathered his senses together and tried to calm himself. Panic would only cloud his ability to see things as clearly as he might otherwise.

"Here comes their leader," the Gamesman said. "Right to my door."

The army had by now crossed the horizon and was spread far to the right and left of the castle. Saxxon could see the flanks closing around them while the center of the line held steady. The sky filled with noiseless reconnaissance aircraft. "Why do we see them now," he silently asked the alien, "in this shape, when back in the other world they were formless?"

"The Empire's forces take on many shapes throughout the Universe. Here, in this place, they appear as you see them."

Saxxon knew, somewhere inside his own mind, that without the unruffled understanding of the alien, to whom the strangest transmutations were commonplace, he would have floundered long ago. Since he had left the MAYA, nothing had long remained the same. Something had only to turn away and turn back — and it had become wonderful or fearful in a new way. Usually fearful.

"Come!" the Gamesman shouted grandly. "Let's go down and meet them. They look awfully threatening, don't they? Come on!" He headed for the dropshaft, but Saxxon caught him by the sleeve. He drew his hand quickly away — the fabric was ice cold. The Gamesman turned on him suddenly, but his face was not threatening as Saxxon anticipated — it was open, questioning. "Yes?" he asked.

"Listen," Saxxon said, we know who they are. They aren't Pieces to us

— they're very dangerous. They will kill us — and probably you too — and the alien doesn't have enough strength to get us out of here. Can you help us? Protect us?"

"You have powers . . ." Plurra said, clearly hoping for assurance.

"I have no powers," the Gamesman said. "None at all! I only play the game. So come — I'm anxious to play!"

When they floated down the dropshaft, Saxxon felt a tickling sensation in his chest. At first he thought it was the decreased gravity, but it wasn't that. It was different. Lungs, he thought. The alien is modifying my lungs to process more air — and he said he lived on air.

At first, Saxxon could only see a blur of yellow uniforms waiting for them in the lower hallway. The faces of the soldiers were bony, hard and lifeless. They carried only sidearms that resembled Saxxon's long-abandoned zeta shear. The Gamesman stepped briskly to the front.

"Who's in charge? Let's see some authority." He stepped up to the nearest soldier. "You in charge?" The flustered soldier nervously shook his head and stepped back. "Well, *who* is?"

As if on cue, there was a commotion at the back of the corridor — everyone shuffled aside to make way for someone who strode swiftly toward the front. His head rose above all the others, and his face, unlike the rank and file, was covered by a soft, form-fitting mask and visor. He too wore a yellow uniform, a brighter shade, and his sleeves were decorated with hashmarks. When he stood in front of the three of them, the Gamesman smiled pleasantly.

Then the man in yellow peeled off the mask. It took Saxxon a second to recognize him.

"Hunter!" He started to lunge at him, but the alien blocked the order

his brain passed to his muscles so that he only seemed to shudder.

"Mr. Saxxon," he said, bowing slightly. "Plurra." He nodded to her. "And you."

"How can you be here — with them? How can —"

"You, Mr. Saxxon, have got out of control with that 'alien' —" (he chuckled to himself) "— tucked away inside you. You are like a very small worm crawling from one warm spot to another, thinking you are being pursued by another of your own kind. You are wrong, Mr. Saxxon. You are dealing with something far larger than yourself here."

"Excuse me?" It was the Gamesman. He pushed himself between Saxxon and Hunter. "Excuse me. Mr. Hunter, I would like to welcome you to my castle and my planet —"

Hunter seemed only to raise his right hand, but he apparently did so with such force, that the Gamesman was lifted several centimeters off the floor and slammed back into Saxxon. He slumped to the floor between them. Hunter glanced at the soldier the Gamesman had spoken to only moments before. "You. Get him on his feet. We'll kill him first."

"Kill me?" The Gamesman groveled convulsively at Hunter's feet. "Praise you, sir. Praise you."

Hunter kicked at him and scowled at the soldier who was trying to drag the Gamesman to his feet. He clung tenaciously to Hunter's ankles.

"Get him out of here before I grease you along with him," Hunter mumbled, his breath coming in short quick gasps. "What's wrong with him?"

"Bless you sir," the Gamesman whined as he was dragged backwards by his feet. "Kill me sir. Yes sir, do sir."

Hunter stepped forward, thrusting his face very near Saxxon's. "Who is he? Why is he so anxious to die?"

Saxxon heard himself say, "I don't know. I don't know anything about him. He was here when we arrived." Peripherially he saw the surprise written all over Plurra's face.

"Bring him back here!" Hunter shouted. Instantly, the Gamesman came running forward, bowing every other step and muttering, "Sir ... Your Highness ... Your Honor ... Your Holiness ... Your Omniscience ..."

"You seem pleased. Explain yourself," Hunter ordered.

"I was under the mistaken impression you were going to plain my world Your Immenseness, but I was wrong. It is my only monument. Knowing it will remain when I am dead lets me gladly die. My Master, I submit —"

"Hold him," Hunter ordered. "Set up the view plates in that tower. Begin the surface operations now."

"What?" The Gamesman collapsed, his face white as paper. "Not my world! Me — kill me instead!"

"We will kill you," Hunter said. "But we would like for you to see the monument we leave behind us. For you, we will alter our ways and destroy the lower life forms first. You will be the first higher form to die," he said, looking at the Gamesman. "And you," he said to Saxxon, "will be the last, so you can admire our pleasure."

Soldiers pushed around them heading for the dropshaft, carrying bulky cartons of communications devices.

"Hunter, what are you?" Saxxon asked evenly. "There isn't any conceivable way you can be here. I left you behind me ... worlds ago."

"There's no way I can be here that you can conceive of, you mean. Needless to say, young man, the universe is far wider than your imagination. Incomprehensibility does not mean impossibility."

"I had forgotten how much I loathed you." Plurra gently took hold

of Saxxon's arm in order to hold him back if he tried to move on Hunter. "I had forgotten the power of hatred," Saxxon said, "and how much I wanted my hands around your soft neck."

Hunter seemed only to be half aware of the threats. He motioned the soldiers and their equipment toward the dropshaft.

"I will kill you," Saxxon said.

"Kill him for me!" the Gamesman screeched from the floor. Soldiers moved around his helpless shape, but when he tried to rise, one of them would give him a glancing blow with his foot and he would collapse again.

"Take him on up," Hunter said, nodding to the Gamesman who wept loudly and piteously.

"I won't die until I know you're dead and rotted."

"Mr. Saxxon, if you were as great as your hatred, you would be famous across the universe. The universe is far larger than your mind can guess — larger and greater in all ways, as I am larger and greater than you. Accept it: I am going to plain this world, then I shall cut you and your friends into many pieces." He smiled.

"Why? Why me?" Saxxon asked. "Why do you chase me all this way? What am I to you or to things of yours that I deserve so much of your time?"

The smile evaporated from his face. "You disturb things."

His lips twitched as he said it. Still, Saxxon wanted to know why he inspired so much hate. "Get them up there," he said under his breath to the nearest soldier. "Get them away from me before I . . ." He turned and stalked away from them, his head hunched down in his shoulders.

They were herded up the dropshaft to the place where the Gamesman had shown them the approach of the army of the Empire — but what a change had been wrought in the topmost room of that tower. Now,

nearly a dozen viewpanels had been set up on spidery tripods so that a broad panorama of the planet's surface was displayed to them. And what a change had come over the Gamesman — his sassiness had been transformed into abject helplessness. A soldier had been directed by Hunter to hold the Gamesman on his feet and to hold him facing the panels.

"Now," Hunter said with grim pleasure, "you will see the power of the Empire. You especially, Mr. Saxxon, will enjoy this, since you are obsessed with murderous violence. This phase is strictly recreational."

Across the screens, the sky filled with rocket-powered drones which sprayed the landscape with an orange mist. This landscape was not nearby, Saxxon knew, for the vegetation was different — there were a few low trees, and the low-growing foliage was much greener than that which surrounded the castle.

"This poisons the land," Hunter said pleasantly. "But as I said, it's purely recreational. The troops are practicing with new or modified equipment here. What we're going to do before we leave here is sap out the heat from the core of the planet — that eliminates any tectonic activity — and then we're going to strip off the atmosphere." He grinned broadly. "That pretty much supercedes what we're doing here. But the troops — the troops enjoy this."

The Gamesman whimpered weakly. Saxxon quickly glanced at him and saw him covertly wink at him. Madness, Saxxon thought.

The scene on the electronic panorama shifted. Another operation was in progress. A great metallic eggshaped craft hung in the air a hundred or so meters above the ground. Its surface was littered with receptors of more than a dozen types, and on the bottom-most curve of its grey surface, a brilliant red needle-beam of

light flickered, pointing at something on the ground here, then there, then another place swiveling and firing faster than thought.

"You should appreciate this, Mr. Saxxon. Although you may not be able to see from here, every time that laser fires, something on the ground dies. Here, of course, there are only small animals. Insects. It must have cleared this area, it's moving to another sector. It works very fast. You should work very fast, Mr. Saxxon, if you plan to enjoy my demise." He grinned broadly.

Saxxon tried to move toward him, but the alien inside him immobilized him. Plurra's hand tightened on his arm.

"Let me go," Saxxon said silently to the thing that held him motionless.

"There will be time," the alien's voice said softly inside his mind.

"Death is fascinating, don't you think?" Hunter said. "And add to that the black mystique of murder. . ." His eyes lifted. "Nothing, nothing in any universe can slow the Empire of the Plain."

Plurra took a lightning step forward and shot her fist into his solar plexus. Hunter stepped backwards just as quickly and softened most of the power of the blow. A soldier deliberately drew his sidearm and pointed it at her. Before he could fire, another soldier laced him with his shear and he fell into an oozing red, heap with rags of yellow slowly soaking up the darker color.

"My order was to keep you alive to enjoy our plaining operation," Hunter explained. "And my orders are never violated. Ah!" He pointed to the screen. A new scene was painted there now. In a clearing, a wet, boggy meadow, several hundred larger animals had been gathered. The image enlarged enough that Saxxon could make out their shapes - they were not human, but they were not

far from it. They stood taller than men by half a meter, but they had four spindly arms arranged along their sides, and their heads hung forward against their chests and swung like boneless sacks of tissue. They were repulsive, but their searching groping motions as the yellow-suited soldiers herded them into a tighter and tighter knot made them seem pathetic, hopeless, and sad.

"This, unfortunately, will have to suffice as the highlight of our campaign here, Mr. Saxxon. Elimination of higher life forms keeps the Empire's forces satisfied for quite some time. These . . . things will hardly keep them happy till nightfall. Observe."

Plurra turned away.

Saxxon saw only the beginning, the singling out of one of the tall animals, the gesture from the soldier indicating that the thing should run, flee — and then the quick tangling fall of the thing a fraction of an instant after the soldier squeezed off a single charge from his sidearm. The thing fell in small pieces.

Saxxon felt his gorge rise. He tried to move, but the alien kept him frozen in the same position.

"This is death, Mr. Saxxon. This is what you would like to do to me."

Although he didn't look, Saxxon could tell with his peripheral vision that the slaughter continued, one animal at a time. He didn't want to see. He didn't want to know the expression on those strange alien faces as they watched their kind be dismembered for sport.

"Watch it, Mr. Saxxon. Let's pretend the soldier is you and I am the beast. Come, come, watch the screen."

Saxxon felt his throat tighten up, his air being cut off by the knot there. He turned away from the spectacle.

"There," Hunter said. "You have selected me as your victim. You lead me by the arm away from everyone

else so if your aim is not exact no one will be hurt. I can see as I look into your eyes, that the anticipation thrills you. You savor my moments of fear. You wonder if I dread my own non-existence or if I have accepted my destiny. You decide that I have not accepted it and that makes you all the more joyful. 'Run!' you say. 'Perhaps you can evade my shots.' You encourage me, raise my hopes. Look Mr. Saxxon, you can see it all here on the screen. There I go, I'm running, dodging when I imagine you might fire — but you restrain yourself, you hold back. Look at the screen. Mr. Saxxon."

A soldier stepped behind him and twisted his head so he would see it.

"I'm running faster and faster — my hopes are rising, 'I've got away!' I say to myself. 'I've made it' But now you raise your weapon — look how slow and casually you do it. You sight along the condenser, you feel the warm trigger in the crease of your finger. You can hear my thoughts as I zig-zag through the mud: 'I've done it! I've escaped that son of a bitch Saxxon!' And then you squeeze."

The tall animal seemed to shatter like glass, his pieces making small splats in the muddy water. The mist of blood quickly settled. "Did you like that, Mr. Saxxon?"

He did not like it. Something had broken inside him. Something deep and hard, something that had grown tightly into every recess of his every emotion. A cool sigh of overwhelming relief flooded over him. It came from his own mind this time, not from the alien's — and at the same time he felt the alien release his hold on him. Where a moment before he had been filled with hard, straining tension, there was now an easy calmness.

"You didn't like it?" Hunter asked humbly.

"No. I didn't. I don't like you Hunter, but I would never kill you. I

have no desire for that."

"A passing dullness of the senses," he assured him.

"When I was on the other world, I had my zeta shear. But when I saw all the peacefulness there, and you weren't there, and I met Plurra — I left it on the beach in some rocks. I left it there because I thought I might need it in the future. I still thought I might need it when we came here. Then you followed and I wanted it so badly — I wanted it because it would increase my odds just a little of cutting you to pieces. Until you showed me that." His head nodded toward the screen.

"At least I have eliminated your greatest desire," Hunter said politely.

"They have apparently finished the larger animals," he said after a glance at the panels. "You three are next. The troops must be kept happy." He started to walk away but then halted. To Saxxon: "Are you sure you don't want to resist just a little for the amusement of my men?" I could turn my back and you could have your chance at me."

Saxxon shook his head.

"Imagine! Your hands on my neck. Your sweetest dream come true. I'll give you that much chance!"

"Hunter, give it up. *I have quit.* Do you understand? I have ceased to be a part of your system. I am not like you now. If you handed me a shear, I would hand it back to you. I won't be a part of the world you hold so dear in your heart." Saxxon felt something moving inside him. "I am yours to do with as you wish." Something coiled and gathered between his lower ribs. "I will not be a part of your poison." It had gathered up tight and —

The Gamesman rose up on his feet, taller than he had ever seemed before he raised his arms high over his head and pronounced in a voice of thunder: "The game is over! You have lost!"

"Kill him!" Hunter screamed, pointing at the Gamesman. "Kill him!

Burn him!"

Simultaneously, seven soldiers fired on him, but he did not fall. He stood, his arms still raised, and he glowed. He seemed to absorb the weapons' energy and with it he burned golden like the sun.

Whatever it had been that had moved inside Saxxon, it discharged in the very second the soldiers had fired. In all the commotion, Saxxon heard the alien's quiet voice instructing him to turn around, and when he did, he saw the shimmering silver of a Gate.

Plurra was already moving toward it, her one hand pulling Saxxon after. Together, in an instant, they dived through it, all the while, the alien's velvety voice telling Saxxon to hurry, that he could only hold the Gate open a few seconds.

THEIR FEET touched down on a flat, rock surface. The level plateau of stone reached as far as the horizon and was broken only by a few ragged lines of weeds that grew where dirt had gathered in clefts, and rarely there grew a gnarled wind-worn tree out of some deeper crack. There was no sun — the dull white light radiated evenly from the uniform cloud cover. The sky seemed oppressively low.

"What is this place?" Plurra asked him.

The alien answered and Saxxon repeated: "It is near where we left Hunter and the Gamesman. So we can expect the Empire to show up here as soon as they locate us — and that won't be long. The alien chose this world over several others because of the air — it's very high in oxygen. He's weak and needs to rebuild his strength. With any luck at all, he'll be prepared when the Empire gets here."

"I don't want to go through that again," Plurra said shaking her head. "God am I tired. So tired. We're safe here?" She sat down.

"He says we are."

Plurra lay on her side and rested her cheek on her hands. "I didn't know I could be so tired," she murmured.

Saxxon sat beside her and felt the alien slip into dormancy. Overhead a large bird circled on unmoving wings. It was the only life he had seen so far, other than the sparse vegetation.

The memory of the Gamesman floated into consciousness. Saxxon laughed a little to himself. He remembered how the man had winked at him and how he had thought him crazy. All the whining and groveling he had done had only been to convince Hunter that the planet was more important to him than his own life — so Hunter had reversed the priorities of the Empire and had killed the lower life forms first, thus giving the alien inside Saxxon time to gather his strength and form the Gate.

Only two things failed to make any sense: How had the Gamesman known that the alien needed time, and what was Hunter's connection with the Empire of the Plain?

Saxxon felt a calmness steal over him. He yawned. When he lay back he saw overhead the same large bird turning in slow, wide circles. He watched it for a minute before his eyelids crept down over his eyes and sleep overtook him.

"Look at this," Plurra's voice whispered urgently.

His eyes popped open, the white glare of the sky momentarily blinding him. Then he saw what she was staring at — the bird. It stood on the flat rock surface not three meters from them, and it was very large. It was as big as Saxxon had been before the alien had merged into his body. It was reddish-brown, and its feathers were so soft and fine that they moved in the breeze that Saxxon could barely feel on his own skin. It stood there on its heavy brown feet, a mixture of eagle

and owl, and stared at them with its huge yellow eyes. Saxxon felt that it knew them, it understood them.

"I've never seen anything like it," Saxxon whispered.

"Or anything so beautiful. Do you think it wants anything from us?"

The bird rose up a little taller and unfolded its wings and spread them wide. They were a lighter rust color on the inside.

Saxxon was awestruck by the size, the beauty and the power of the bird.

It half-folded its wings, crouched a little, and sprung into the air. Saxxon and Plurra were washed in the heavy waves of air it fanned as it powered its way aloft. Once it was a dozen meters above the rock surface, its motions smoothed out and became effortlessly liquid. In less than a minute, it was only a dark spot near the far horizon.

"That was . . ." Plurra began. "I don't know. When it was looking at us, I had the feeling that there was some kind of comprehension in it of who we are. And at the same time there was a kind of . . ."

"A kind of emptiness," Saxxon said. He had felt it too.

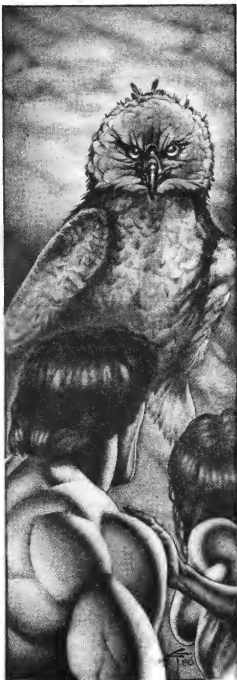
"Not negative though." She searched for words. "He just saw us, knew us completely, and flew away."

Saxxon stared at the horizon where it had vanished. In all the days and months since Isha and the others had been taken out of his life, he had never seen such peaceful power and such calm acceptance as had been manifest in the bird's gaze and in his casual taking to the air.

"Is the alien rested enough to get us out of here?" Plurra asked. "I don't mean to be ungrateful, but this is not a place where food is going to be easy to find."

"He says he could get us out of here now, but the only place he could take us wouldn't be any better. Worse, in fact. The only air there is frozen solid."

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"The alien said that? He must be feeling better — it sounds like a little attempt at alien humor."

Saxxon grinned. "Maybe. He says we should rest some more. And he says he appreciates your appreciation."

Repressing a laugh, Plurra bowed, as best she could, from a sitting position.

Saxxon wandered across the rock face and gathered several handfuls of dry grass. They folded these into little pads to rest their heads on. Then, enfolded inside Saxxon's much larger arms and legs, Plurra snuggled against him and quickly fell asleep. Still thinking about the easy flight of the bird, Saxxon followed her.

The earth moved.

Saxxon was on his feet instantly. Both his own and the alien's senses swept the area. One word shot through his mind: volcano.

He pulled Plurra to her feet. "What?" she mumbled sleepily. "It's still dark."

But Saxxon's eyes perceived more than darkness — heat was rising through fractures in the rock plate on which they stood. And though it would not be possible for Plurra to sense it, his equilibrium detected a minute trembling in the ground under his feet.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice husky but no longer drowsy.

"The Empire has found us."

"I only felt . . . maybe a little tremor."

"Look over there," he said. "Half-way between here and the horizon."

To his eyes it was a glowing red as the hot escaping air poured out into the open.

"All I can see is a little light-colored haze."

The ground rolled beneath them. Saxxon held her from falling.

"Tell your alien to get us out of here," she said.

"I already did — he can't form the Gate yet. He doesn't have the power. All he says is 'Wait.'"

A gaping crack opened up where they had gathered weeds for pillows — seven or eight meters to their right. Heat swept over them.

"This way," Saxxon said. He pulled her toward a low spot. His eyes worked well in darkness. They lay there out of the heat and listened to the rock plateau crack open with a noise like thunder, and following that was the rolling crumble of the edges as they fell into the heated interior.

They could only wait. The noise never grew louder, but it moved from one side to the other and back again. Gradually, the sky took on a pink cast — in Plurra's eyes. In Saxxon's the planet was a fountain of heat which it shot into the air in great red feathery plumes.

"Movement," the alien whispered in his mind. "To the right . . . Bipedal . . . Humanoid — It is Hunter."

Saxxon told Plurra. Her face reflected the dread that filled her mind. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll be out of here soon." He stood up and climbed out of the depression.

"Ah!" Hunter said, his yellow uniform brilliant in the red light. "There's no surprising you, is there. I know about you now. You have some kind of alien crawling around inside your skin who does the magic tricks for you."

"He's company," Saxxon said.

"And you're counting on him to get you out of here before we plain this ball of mud. You won't make it. You're being monitored, young man. Any change in your energy field and we'll cut a hole in you big enough to push your lady friend through." He pointed straight up. "It's just above the cloud-cover. It's watching you." Hunter waved his arms at the spewing fissures that surrounded them. "Beautiful isn't it? We're venting the

heat from the core through the other side of the planet. There's a certain amount of shrinkage across the whole sphere and that, of course, causes certain disruptions in the crust — like this."

"Why don't you just burn me? Be direct about it."

"I appreciate the element of hope that is inspired by indirection. Then, in the last moment, when the hope is destroyed, the triumph is sweeter."

"Hunter, there are two things I don't understand, and I'm beginning to think I never will. Why do you enjoy killing things, and why do I mean so much to you? I'm a nobody you picked out of Socalizona to fit into your MAYA. You selected me in the first place. Have I so fouled up your plans that I deserve to be run down through the universe and have planets destroyed under my feet, just to eliminate me?"

"You disturb things, Mr. Saxxon." His face twisted into a sneering grimace. "I kept you alive for my own purposes, and you have repaid me with problems you couldn't imagine."

"I can't imagine them," Saxxon said. "I haven't done anything to you that I know of — except to try to stay away from you."

"Perhaps you'll know sometime. Maybe the answer will come out of the bottom of your brain just as the Empire strips away the breathable air from this gob of filth. But I won't help you, Saxxon. That's one question you're going to die with. As for why I enjoy extracting life from the living — because I came to realize that life, all life, is a disease of the inanimate. I am a purist, Saxxon."

A sudden shift of the crust made them step sideways to maintain their balance. The sky was starting to turn white with day's glare, and the alien inside Saxxon perceived the outline overhead of the egg-shaped killing machine.

"I strive to make the universe pure,

free from the clutter of doubt, speculation, and crisis that is spawned by conscious thought. I long to see the universe governed solely by unthinking, natural law. It is my life's work to purify, to sterilize, and to make clean. And you, Saxxon, disturb things."

Saxxon shrugged. "I suppose this is the party line of the Deocracy you said you were serving."

"It is," he said sternly. "I leave you now. This place is becoming unstable. Enjoy your last few minutes."

As Hunter was speaking, Saxxon felt the familiar coiling of power inside his lower ribs. He tried to resist it, to hold it back, because the memory of the sputtering flicker of the laser from the machine overhead stayed vividly implanted in his memory. "Stop!" he told the alien — but the coiling grew tighter and the sense of gathered power inside him swelled to the breaking point.

Saxxon stood utterly self-absorbed, trying to counter the alien's will. He barely perceived that Plurra now stood beside him or that Hunter, starting to move away, was saying, "I shall remember you both, with your desperate existence, with all the fondness I accord the memory of disease."

The alien's power poured from him like a slow expiration. He expected the smell of his own scorched flesh to flash up in his face — but it didn't. When he turned his perceptions from inside to out, he saw Hunter standing dumbfounded, staring up in the sky. Plurra, too, looked up, her lips parted in surprise.

Saxxon knew the Gate was glimmering into existence beside him. But overhead — overhead something burned like the sun — something hung in the air just below the cloud-cover and blazed yellow-orange like a suspended fireball.

The alien's perceptions translated the burning glare: hovering beneath the killing machine, the bird absorbed the energy of the lasers and radiated it

as visible light. It burned but it did not die.

Hunter stood stupefied, watching the egg-shaped grey metallic satellite shifting position to try to reach Saxxon as the great bird easily stayed with it, blocking the flickering laser pulses.

The ground heaved again, and a stream of lava broke through a widening crack a dozen meters from them. Saxxon pulled Plurra with him to the Gate.

"I'll find you," Hunter shouted over the thunder of the collapsing crust. It ground and rumbled like an unceasing avalanche. "I won't leave you die of old age!" he shrieked. "I'll have you within days!"

Saxxon pushed Plurra ahead of him into the shimmering film, then he followed, his eyes lifted to see the great cruciform bird that lit up the sky.

Water surrounded them. Only tiny herringbone ripples moved across its surface, and Saxxon and Plurra found themselves standing on an outcropping of stone not two meters across. Plurra pressed herself close to him. Near the horizon, a huge bloated red sun hung like a flat spot of paint.

"What is this place?" Plurra said, her voice edged with growing desperation.

"The alien is silent. It looks . . . feels very old."

There was no smell in the air of water or of wet rock, and nothing moved across the sky.

Plurra stared at him with worried eyes. "We can't stay here. We'll starve if Hunter doesn't find us before that."

Saxxon felt the alien move inside him. "I can take you no farther," it told him. The voice was distant and slow-speaking. Saxxon said nothing to Plurra. "You must move yourself now. I have weakened myself too much."

"But how?" Saxxon asked him. "I

can't do the things you've done. I don't have the power or the perceptions or the knowledge."

"Sit," came the alien's small voice. "Sit and be silent."

"He's talking to you, isn't he?" Plurra said.

Saxxon nodded. "We're in trouble," he said, sitting down. "And this time . . . This time, I'm not sure we'll make it. He wants me to listen."

Plurra touched his hand. "I'll wait for you."

Saxxon listened. He closed his eyes and waited for the alien's voice. Then a warmth passed over his skin, a sudden heat that he thought could have only come from the sun. He opened his eyes, expecting to see Plurra and saw instead, sitting in front of him like a mirror image, the alien, embodied in flesh once again, but weak-looking, frail, and haggard.

"You are sitting quietly in the middle of a dead ocean and Plurra stands beside you watching the sun," the alien whispered. "But you and I, we will talk here, this way."

Only then did Saxxon realize that the two of them appeared to sit in the middle of a whiteness. He felt the ground — floor? — under him and it was white, but all around there seemed to be no distance, no depth — only whiteness.

"I am sorry," the alien said apologetically, "that I am too weakened to provide —" (he gestured at the white that enfolded them) "— a pleasant backdrop."

Saxxon started to say something but the words stopped in his throat — there was a movement somewhere, an odd shifting, and it caused ripples of fear to pass over him.

"It is Hunter," the alien said. "He has found you. This time he will kill you if you depend on my help."

"Where are we?" Saxxon asked quickly. "If I knew where we were maybe —"

"You aren't anywhere. You never

have been, at any point in your life. You were in a place you called Socializona, and from there you were put in the thing called MAYA, and out of that you came here. Mr. Saxxon, you are still in Socializona, still in the MAYA."

"I can't -- You said --"

"It was a necessary illusion, as all illusions are, one way or the other."

"But you and Plurra and --"

"-- and Hunter are with you. Yes."

Again, there was the peculiar sensation of movement.

"Mr. Saxxon, there is very little of me left. Your existence now depends on you. What there is of me I am going to give you, and perhaps then you will understand. Goodbye, sir." The alien's lips turned up at the corners, though he seemed so weak that even this small movement was difficult. "Listen carefully."

A maelstrom of vertigo flooded through Saxxon. He seemed to leave the ground and spin through emptiness.

He saw himself, confused and vicious, ready to kill, as he stepped through the doorway into the MAYA, and then he merged with the machine -- the wide green meadow, the wildflowers, and Isha, his wife, filled his mind. But that was not real, and he placed it inside his mind as he saw it, whole, alive and complete.

The alien craft drifted against a mottled background of stars and nebulae. But the men and women who inhabited it were not divided by individuality, they were one and the same -- they were the alien. On the jungle continent, the alien stood before him, and Saxxon stepped forward, merging their persons.

And Plurra -- the woman who had seemed so much a part of himself. She stood on the beach, the wind playing at the tip ends of her long hair. "It hasn't taken you long," she said. "There was a place in me where I

knew you would find me." She smiled and across her face ran her feelings, as open as words themselves: surprise, assuredness, and love. She stepped against him and melted through his flesh, she vanished to his eyes and became alive to his feelings.

And the Gamesman -- "I play! I play!" he shouted from his tower. "I play the only game there is!" The Gamesman turned to Saxxon and took him by the shoulders. "Listen," he said, "you have to play it like life and death, because that's what it is. But don't forget --" A comically manic grin spread over his face. "You have to play."

Saxxon tried to say something, but when the tide of the Gamesman's mind entered his own, he could only gasp for air.

And the bird -- majestic and silent, who had looked at him without thought but with full, animal comprehension -- the bird entered him and he became calm and easeful.

Only Hunter remained. "You became too powerful inside the MAYA," he said as he came out of the whiteness. "I wanted to use you so I let you live. But then . . ."

Saxxon looked at him. He felt nothing about Hunter -- he simply perceived him. Hunter cringed as though Saxxon's glance pierced his skin.

"But then things went wrong. We couldn't understand it. You took over the MAYA when we tried to deactivate it, something always went wrong. It was you -- you were taking on powers of a kind . . ." He seemed near sobbing. "They said they would let me live if I went after you. But I can't get back. You've done something to the MAYA -- it's too real -- *I can't get out.*"

Saxxon closed his eyes and was left in utter silence. Inside him now resided all the lives that had touched his own inside the MAYA, where he had been, it now seemed, for years. He did

not especially want out, but there was something he wanted to try.

"Yes," said the Gamesman, "draw the cards and play!"

He felt the powers gathering in him — not in one place as they had before — they swirled and glowed in every cell of his body. Where he aimed them, he could not guess, but he focussed them outward from himself, away from everything stale and familiar.

"We do these things," the alien had once said, "because these are things we do."

"Yes!" the Gamesman shouted.

"Yes!" Plurra said behind her smile.

A hurricane of power ripped through him, shredding his thoughts, tearing apart his old sense of himself, and then it thrust him down into some new shape. He felt like a cloud of dreams spinning through a vortex and being pushed into a solid, physical shape.

THE RAFT bobbed in the slow swells. On the near shore, he could see several lights shining through square windows. Behind him, the sun had set not long before, leaving the sky yellow near the edge of the sea and an airy cobalt blue over his head.

In his hands he held a long paddle that was braced on a pivot at the stern of the raft. When he moved it from side to side, the raft rolled forward on the swells toward the lights of the shore.

Saxxon grinned to himself. Where was he? Was he still inside the MAYA? As Hunter had once said, he would ever know. But that was irrelevant now. He was here and the raft moved closer to shore with each push of the paddle.

Whether he was in the MAYA created by the men and women of Socalizona, or whether he was in the MAYA of some creature whose existence he had never suspected, a kind

of dreamer who dreamed the dream — it was all irrelevant.

Water lapped at his feet. He pushed the raft to the shore, a sailor finally come back from the sea. ●

Wayne Wightman

When I was five, I lived in Missouri, surrounded by cornfields, apple orchards, and pastures. One day my brother asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up.

"A magician!" I said because I knew two or three card tricks and people thought it was fun to be fooled by a five-year-old.

But my brother had other ideas. "You want to be a writer, don't you?"

"Oh yes," I answered. "I want to be a writer." I suppose what I really wanted to do was make people happy — especially my brother. Many times over the years, I repeated that catechism:

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A writer!"

"Right."

When I was twenty-five, I lived in San Francisco, surrounded by tall buildings and asphalt, and once in a while, if I looked up at whatever small piece of sky might be visible, I sometimes saw a sparrow or a circling gull. I was interested in astronomy and paleontology, of all things, in that place where there's hardly any sky or dirt. One day I wondered why I wasn't interested in anything closer than the moon or later than the Pleistocene.

Well, the answer wasn't very flattering — but it was interesting.

Now I'm all the things I've wanted to be. A writer is a magician. If he's any good, you see and feel things you've never experienced before. And science fiction populates the stars and the past and the future with people, human and otherwise, and banishes loneliness to the remotest corner of the heart.

I still like to make people happy.

WHY WE CHOSE THIS STORY

After grabbing you by the throat with the opening sentence, "Metamind" never lets

you go, never disappoints. Being with Saxxon on his incredible quest for deliverance from Hunter and the MAYA is supreme entertainment and more. Integral to the lively caper is a philosophical poser: are Truth, Perfection and even Reality themselves the ultimate illusions? The

search for them seems to be the only thing we can be sure of as being real. Saxxon's need for reasons evaporates as he becomes more of an integrated personality; you feel he has won this game, wherever it was played, and his existence seems perfect just the way it is.



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AMAZING FACTS

ways placed a great emphasis on the red planet and the god of war they identified with it. While the Romans were the most successful Mars worshippers, they were not the only people to raise the planet to the status of a god. Many cultures began praying to Mars, and the world seemed to be split between worshippers of Mars and Venus.

Mars returned to the Earth again in 687 B.C. and discharged a great electrical blast that killed 185,000 soldiers of the Assyrian army that the Hebrews were fighting. At the same time, the *Bamboo Book of China* reports the planets leaving their orbits and the Earth shaking.

In this last encounter with Mars, the Earth's axis tilted again, regaining the ten degrees it lost during the first encounter with the red planet in 721 B.C. (Isaiah 38:8).

According to Velikovsky, the encounter in 687 B.C. was the last time Earth came into such close proximity with another

planet. Mars settled into an orbit beyond the Earth, and Venus became the second planet in the solar system. All has been peaceful since then.

Velikovsky published *Worlds in Collision* in 1950 through Macmillan Co. Even before the book saw the light of print the scientific community condemned it as a pack of lies, and Velikovsky himself as a charlatan and a quack. Most vehement in his denunciation was Harlow Shapley, professor of astronomy at Harvard.

Without reading *Worlds* Shapley launched a campaign to discredit Velikovsky, which was joined by other astronomers, including Fred Whipple (Shapley's successor as director of the Harvard Observatory), Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin (a member of Shapley's staff), Dean McLaughlin (a professor of astronomy at the University of Michigan), Harold Urey (professor of chemistry) and others.

Shapley and his co-workers began putting pressure on Macmillan not to publish *Worlds*, and when the book was published Shapley threatened to institute a boycott against Macmillan's text books and other scientific publications. Despite its success in bookstores, *Worlds* was dropped by Macmillan. Doubleday & Co., Inc. picked it up as well as Velikovsky's subsequent books.

Whether through pressure from Shapley or their own editorial decisions, the major scientific journals refused to publish any of Velikovsky's articles, allowing his theories to be attacked in their pages but not defended. An article in the December 2, 1979 New York Times says *Scientific American* blasted *Worlds* but would not accept Velikovsky's rebuttal, and *Science*, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, rejected a Velikovsky manuscript without opening it.

Less biased scientists were shocked by the actions of Shapley and his friends, and began to rally behind Velikovsky on a personal level while still holding reservations about his theories. Albert Einstein wrote to Velikovsky in 1955, urging him to "savor the whole episode for its humorous side." Einstein also offered to help Velikovsky arrange experiments to test some of his conclusions.

Velikovsky spent a great deal of time trying to have tests of his ideas made, for unlike many authors who propose a striking theory on the basis of references in various cultures' mythologies, Velikovsky made specific statements about planets that could be experimentally tested.

Jupiter would be a source of radio waves, Velikovsky predicted; Venus would be found to be hot; the rocks on Earth's moon would be magnetic; the Alps and Himalayas were created around 1500 B.C.; Venus would have hydrocarbons in its atmosphere, the moon's surface was melted between 3500 and 2700 years ago; organic matter would be found on the moon.

Astronomers have since verified several of Velikovsky's predictions. Jupiter has been found to be a source of radio waves, Venus is hot (847 degrees F. according to the Pioneer Venus II probe), and the moon's rocks are magnetic.

But other of Velikovsky's predictions

have been refuted. Examinations of the moon's surface and the Earth's Alps and Himalayan mountains show no evidence of any catastrophe in 1500 B.C.; no appreciable amount of organic matter was found on the moon; and Venus' atmosphere does not contain hydrocarbons.

So what is one to think of Velikovsky?

Was he correct? Has the Earth been struck repeatedly by planets, altering the face of the globe and its civilizations?

Evidence shows some of the predictions based on Velikovsky's premise are accurate, most of his predictions did not pan out, but an intriguing number of them did.

Perhaps his conclusions are correct and his evidence is wrong.

Perhaps he made some inspired guesses about the temperature of Venus and Jupiter's generation of radio waves.

Or perhaps he was in fact a charlatan who concocted a startling theory to sell a few books.

Each of those "perhaps-es" have adherents, and the debate about Velikovsky continues; *Worlds* cannot come up in conversation without generating a lively — and emotional — discussion. A person either believes Velikovsky or condemns him, and there is little ground between the two positions.

Part of the appeal of Velikovsky's theories lies in the overwhelming condemnation that greeted *Worlds*; one gets a sense of the lone David against the gigantic Goliath of the scientific community, and sympathy always extends to the underdog.

But there is also an excitement to the concepts of worlds colliding, that the solar system is not the static, stable environment normally seen. Velikovsky brings a sense of the unpredictable, terrifying wonder the immensity of the sky must once have generated in humanity before scientists made it safe with their explanations.

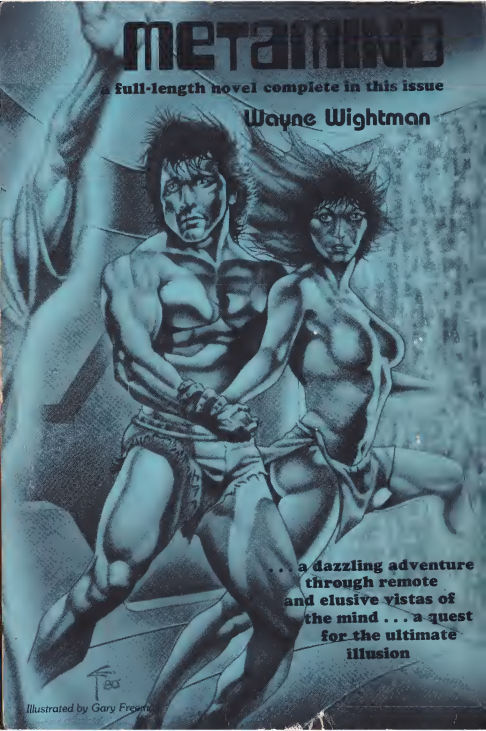
This radical view of the solar system presents the mind with a new challenge. The reader must open his or her imagination to follow the course of *Worlds*, and that makes it valuable above and beyond the accuracy of its theories.

After all, minds were made to be blown, as the saying goes. ●

METAMIND

a full-length novel complete in this issue

Wayne Wightman



... a dazzling adventure
through remote
and elusive vistas of
the mind ... a quest
for the ultimate
illusion

Illustrated by Gary Freeman